

DD DUNGEON BUSTERS

Vol. 3

Author

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SenriGAN





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Prologue

A terribly emaciated man and a young, blue-haired girl walked together in the darkness. Suddenly, a red giant lunged at them. No sooner had the man passed by the giant, flickering like a ghost as he went, than the monster fell to the ground, separating neatly into two halves before turning into smoke.

“Mifa, you really never fight, do you?”

“Nope. I’m all bark, no bite.”

The girl answered with no expression whatsoever, before stuffing the piece of chocolate she held into her mouth.

“You should at least protect yourself, all right?”

Despite what he had just said, the man kept fighting while making sure she was out of harm’s way. The man, who was a doctor, had been deceived by some children from the slum and ended up in this dimly lit underground maze. By fighting monsters, he had eventually obtained superhuman strength, but at the expense of his mental state, which had also undergone some changes. As a doctor, he should have treasured life more than anyone else did, yet he was now able to kill people without batting an eye.

In this dungeon, monsters dropped food when they were defeated, and he would then share this reward with the children of the slum. Only during those times was he still able to feel human.

“We’ll reach the final floor soon. We should start making preparations.”

“You and the monsters grow stronger so quickly, Mifa. I’m quite envious.”

Although he didn’t particularly feel as if he had become stronger, he was forced to admit that this was indeed true, due to the fact that he was now able to defeat monsters with a single blow and no longer sustained injuries when cut.

However, the same couldn’t be said about his mental state. He had already

killed several human beings. At this point, his guilt had subsided, and he had even started feeling as if his actions had been perfectly justified. Someone had to rectify this twisted world.

If things kept moving in the same direction for another fifty or a hundred years and a fraction of wealthy countries kept monopolizing all the resources, more and more people would find themselves in deep poverty, struggling to survive. Whether someone earned a meager thousand dollars a year or as much as a million dollars a year, all people needed the same amount of food and shelter to survive. However, part of the population kept getting pushed into small and unsanitary spaces while a select few built pools and basketball courts they didn't even use in their backyards and slept in needlessly large beds that decorated their colossal houses.

Although so much wealth and space could have easily provided for plenty of people, these individuals turned a blind eye and pretended they were unable to help. How was it that they could remain unperturbed in spite of knowing that the way they lived had only been made possible by the deaths of thousands?

In this mad world, the only thing that could prompt those idiots—who thought themselves sane—to change was even greater madness.

“Then I'll immerse this world in madness. I shall become the Demon King. Heh heh... Ha ha ha ha!”

The man took out cards from his inner pocket and threw them. Several dozen monsters simultaneously appeared in front of him, awaiting orders.

Chapter 1: The Dungeon Crusaders in Japan

[Reich Republic — Rolf Schnabel]

The first time I heard about the Crusaders was back when I'd been on the verge of graduating university. I'd traveled from Stuttgart, where my university was located, to Munich, where my father was a member of the city council. However, taking part in a local council was an honorary position in Reich, and members rarely received any monetary compensation. As such, my father had also been operating a machinery company, and I'd been set to start working there as well after graduating.

I received a sudden phone call from my father, letting me know that the Vatican State had some business with me. My father was quite well-known in Munich and was even a higher-up in the prestigious Teutonic Order. I had also taken part in some prestigious events a few times. Although I wasn't a fervent Catholic, I was still enough of a believer to go to church and pray before important days, such as sports competitions I'd taken part in with my club or the time I had confessed to my girlfriend.

"Guess I'll have lunch in Nördlingen."

At the wheel of my Quattro, I arrived in the city of Nördlingen—which was situated two hundred kilometers to the east of Stuttgart—just past noon. The city's core was still an old town, but a new and modern Nördlingen had gradually spread out beyond the original ramparts. The old part of town was fully surrounded by walls and had a cohesive appearance: all bricks and steeply pitched roofs. It was also said to have been used as a model for a popular anime about titans, and you would indeed be reminded of that fictional world if you gazed upon the area around Daniel Church Tower and the market square.

I had some leberkäse and beer for lunch in a café close to Daniel Church Tower. While there were laws that regulated drinking and driving in Reich, blood alcohol level restrictions were fairly loose, and it was pretty much an unspoken rule that drinking one beer wasn't an issue.

Having finished my meal, I pulled onto the highway leading out of the city and continued on my way to Munich. I had just gone back to see my parents for the new year, so I didn't quite miss my home yet, but the delicious roast pork knuckles my mother would make—her specialty—made the trip worth it.

“Yesterday, His Holiness the Pope issued a command ordering the creation of a Crusader force to subjugate the dungeons,” my father said. “Each of the three great European knight orders, including our very own Teutonic Order, must recommend two young people to join this new force. I am thinking of recommending you.”

Crusaders? We're in the twenty-first century! The oddly anachronistic title confused me, but I understood the pope's reasoning. If the Catholic Church did not react in the face of a supernatural phenomenon such as the dungeons, its *raison d'être* would surely be called into question.

However... Why did it have to be me? I had been playing rugby since middle school, so I was fairly confident in my physical strength, but there were plenty of people my age who were more fervent believers.

After I raised this question, my father nodded.

“The Crusaders' activities will not be restricted solely to the Iberian Peninsula, and they will need to travel to all parts of the world,” he explained. “Of course, this means that they will need to subjugate dungeons in places where Catholicism is not the dominant religion. For this reason, it was decided that healthy youths with experience in sports who can show flexibility when dealing with those of other faiths would be selected. As your father, I know that you are a responsible person who takes good care of his friends and companions. You also have experience leading a team and making sure everyone works together. I believe you will be able to lead the Crusaders.”

I was happy to hear my father praise me, but it was hard to believe that this was the full story. My father was indeed a pious man, but as a good Reichman, he was very rational. Even if the chivalric order had told him to send his son, he wasn't the type to simply agree out of the goodness of his heart. *What's he thinking?*

“Dad, you know I decided to join your company after graduating. Be honest

with me. Is there really any reason to give that up and join the Crusaders?”

My father stayed silent for a little while before pulling out a piece of paper adorned with the papal tiara and papal insignia—crossed gold and silver keys. Its contents seemed to concern the way the Crusaders would be compensated.

“Put simply, Crusaders will be allowed to claim ownership of a dungeon they are able to clear as long as it’s situated in Reich, Italie, or Franze. The hydrogen energy technology that Japan developed will soon be used around the world. When this happens, dungeons will surely be incredibly valuable.”

“So you’re telling me to join the Crusaders for the sake of money?”

“Yes. I decided to recommend you for this reason. I think this is a very good opportunity for you. However, I also intend to respect your wishes. If you do not want to join the Crusaders, we can pretend this conversation never happened.”

Saying I had no interest in the dungeons would be a lie. Whether at school or among my teammates, the dungeons were a hot topic. However, the idea of clearing dungeons as the “armed hand of God” made me a little uncomfortable. In the Middle Ages, the Northern Crusades advanced all the way to the Baltic Sea, but they ended up being nothing more than a covert invasion using religious enlightenment as an excuse. From what my father told me, the expeditions would amount to little more than groundwork for fights over resources that were inevitably to follow, rather than true altruistic work led by the clergy. You couldn’t really call that a commendable goal.

That said, the threat that the dungeons posed couldn’t be ignored. The Monster Stampede was brought up on TV day after day, and many believed that the European Union ought to make a move to prevent it. If nothing was done, my motherland, Reich Republic, would eventually fall, and my beloved friends and family would be in fatal danger. More than anything else, someone needed to take care of the dungeons to ensure that Bertina—my girlfriend, who I intended to marry—would stay safe.

“I’ll be honest with you. I don’t care about profiting off the dungeons. However, I can’t ignore the possibility of a Monster Stampede. Bertina and I... We’ve already decided to get married after graduation. If I can protect her by

joining the Crusaders, then I want to take that opportunity.”

Of course, I had a lot of respect for my father, who had managed to build his company all on his own. However, I had my own wishes and motives. I had made my decision. I felt bad for disappointing my father, but I would ignore the rewards while making sure to annihilate the dungeons.



[Chiyoda City, Otemachi — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After finishing up my meeting at the Ministry of Defense in Ichigaya, I walked to Dungeon Busters’s headquarters for back-office staff in Otemachi. Construction of the new building in Shishibone, Edogawa City, would be complete at the end of next month. With this building as its new headquarters, Dungeon Busters would finally be able to start operating properly.

Dungeon Busters wasn’t simply an adventurer’s party. It was a clan that brought together multiple adventurer parties. For this reason, back-office staff who handled legal matters and accounting were an absolute necessity. As a management consultant, I had been in contact with dozens of companies. Those that had undergone rapid growth were usually unable to sustain that growth long-term, even going bankrupt altogether due to faulty management. Dungeon Busters’s notoriety had already spread all over the country, but as a commercial organization, we were only getting started. I wanted to make sure I put together an effective management department as soon as possible.

Everyone was hard at work when I entered the office located in the Otemachi Twin Towers. There were cardboard boxes stacked all over the place in preparation for the move to the Edogawa City office.

General Manager Mukai and I met to discuss the current situation and future needs of the back-office staff.

“Ezoe-shi, I need to ask you something.”

As we worked out the details of our income and expenditures and discussed an upcoming team-building trip for employees, Mutsuo—who was in charge of our IT department—walked in. Apparently, he needed a graphics card good enough to handle editing 4K videos. I had only ever used laptops, so I wasn’t all

that well-versed in computer hardware.

“Since you gave me a budget for it, I built my own work computer, but I want to add a second graphics card if possible,” said Mutsuo. “I tried to plan ahead and built a top-of-the-line computer, but it’d be really helpful to up the specs a little more, so I can edit 4K videos. Ah, I also think we ought to upgrade the display to a triple 4K-monitor setup.”

“Hmm. I really don’t get anything about this stuff. Do we even need to use 4K?” I asked.

“Dungeons are very dimly lit. On top of that, your movements may become too fast to see with the naked eye if you guys rank up to Rank B or Rank A. We’re already using top-notch recording equipment to shoot videos, but we need better computers and work environments to edit them! D’ya get it?!”

Mutsuo is getting quite fired up.

Well, even though he asked me if I got it, I still wasn’t a computer pro. I didn’t understand anything about 4K or double graphics cards. Was there really such a huge difference between a laptop you could buy in stores and a PC built from the ground up? I’d bought my computer three years ago, and if I remembered correctly, it had a quad-core CPU or something... I’d never had any issues editing documents with it, though, and I could also watch videos online. Besides, wasn’t the top-tier recording equipment he mentioned pretty much the same as the camera on a cell phone? Could the human eye even process the beauty of 4K videos? I definitely couldn’t understand why in the world you’d need three screens to edit videos either! A normal fourteen-inch laptop was probably good enough for video editing or even CG creation, wasn’t it? It had always been more than enough for my consulting work, at least.

An endless flow of arguments came to mind. However, Mutsuo would be sure to lose some of his motivation if I told him no. For Dungeon Busters, the value of money wasn’t quite the same as it was for other companies. Money didn’t really matter to us at all, to be honest. A bit of dungeon delving would quickly make up for the amount we spent. In contrast, what Dungeon Busters needed to value was human resources. If this could help Mutsuo stay motivated, I might as well let him do as he liked.

“I get it, I get it! For now, I’ll give you ten million yen, so go buy whatever you need in Akihabara,” I told him. “I don’t need to hear the details.”

General Manager Mukai stopped me with a bitter smile. “Ezoe-san, we do need to know the details in order to account for the capital we spend.”

I contacted the metropolitan bank’s head office—the one that handled Dungeon Busters’s account—and had them prepare ten million yen in crisp bills. Mutsuo, along with two other otakus, happily accepted the money and made their merry way to Akihabara. *Are you guys even done with preparations for the move?!*

“All right, let’s take a look at this week’s applications.”

Focusing once more, I checked the current list of candidate applications. Managing these was one of the most important duties of this office. Although over a hundred people had already passed the dungeon adventurer exam successfully, most were only interested in becoming miners focused on gathering magic stones. Of those who aimed to become busters, many came knocking at our door. However, we weren’t in a position to hire them all at the moment.

We needed to make Dungeon Busters into a proper organization as soon as possible. I wanted to implement a clan system in which adventurers would be allowed to handle their own teams upon reaching Rank C. That meant my first goal was to get Rinko, Masayoshi, and the others to Rank C and have each of them lead a team.

“As expected from those who completed boot camp, no one expects to magically become stronger overnight. This guy was on the national rugby team, huh? As for this other guy, he’s also a former sumo wrestler, like Masayoshi... Actually, isn’t this the sekitori who got nicknamed the ‘robot’ of the sumo world? Both probably have plenty of willpower. With their big builds, they are already valuable too. I really want to recruit them as tanks...”

As could be expected, a good chunk of the busters applicants were athletes. If we kept to the idea of making six-person teams, that wasn’t necessarily an issue. We could teach them battle tactics and how to make crucial decisions, such as when to fall back, during the busters’ training.

“Mukai-san, do we have enough staff to keep the office running?” I asked.

“We’re good for now. However, looking at the number of applications we’re receiving, I’m afraid we won’t have enough manpower in the near future. At the end of the month, I plan to go check out the new main office building.”

“Please don’t hesitate to purchase anything you think we may need. I trust your judgment. Regarding catering for the dormitory, I’d like to recommend someone to handle it all. Once we get *that* payment, we’ll be able to make new investments. We don’t need to worry about the financial health of the company for now, but we can’t quite predict how the market will change. It’s best to have some extra funds.”

The timing of the Monster Stampede was still a secret. However, the Japanese government had already publicly acknowledged the Monster Stampede as the most likely outcome. Many rich countries had already started building underground facilities and were stocking up on things like emergency rations, among other essentials.

“It seems Japanese emergency goods have been selling like hotcakes these days,” said Mukai. “Since we showed some camping equipment made in Japan in our videos, most of the makers offered to be our sponsors. One of my acquaintances used to work in the PR Department of the Metropolitan Bank, so I also reached out to him.”

“Please hire him. We’re going to need a PR Department sooner or later. Mutsuo and the others are great at making promotional videos, but they don’t have much experience with the planning side of things. I’d also prefer if we tried to have the busters only use goods made in Japan.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Nationalism is on the rise in Japan, because of the threat the dungeons pose. If we favor Japanese products, our popularity will definitely get a boost.”

I shrugged. From watching my interviews, some people were wrongly calling me a right-winger or a conservative, but I figured there was no point in correcting them. In fact, it was probably better for me to be misunderstood. I was neither right-wing nor left-wing. I also didn’t choose which products to purchase based on whether they were Japanese or foreign goods. I only made

rational decisions based on the quality-price ratio. Of course, I wasn't childish enough to go argue about this in public.

On the day before we went to go clear Yokohama Dungeon, I made some preparations within Abyss, the Rank A dungeon located in Shishibone. To be precise, I rolled the gacha.

"Let's use the Rank C Monster Cards I got in Yokohama Dungeon. I'm hoping to get some SR equipment, but I also want to roll the item gacha a few times."

I had more or less 2,600 cards in my possession, so I could gacha 286 times. *Let's roll the item gacha eleven times for now.*

Name: Elixir

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: A super medicine that allows the user to modify their body in any way they see fit. It is possible to change one's sex or restore a youthful appearance. However, it will not extend one's life span.

Out of the eleven cards I received, five were Rare cards—such as Extra Potions—five were Uncommon—such as High Potions—and the last one was a Super Rare (SR) card. Normally, I would have rejoiced, but its effect was rather worrisome.

"Now that's quite scary," I said after a moment's pause. "The effect is way too incredible."

Extra Potions could restore or heal the body, returning it back to its natural state. Although it could most likely restore one's body to the state it had been prior to cosmetic surgery, for instance, it probably also meant that it could not heal someone with a congenital disorder, though we hadn't verified this yet.

This Elixir, however, allowed one to manipulate their body in any way their heart desired. It might even be potent enough to heal genetic conditions, such as Down syndrome. Changing one's face, height, weight, or even one's sex at will was also possible. In other words, this was a medicine that could make you a different person, down to your very genome!

"Well, I definitely need to report this to the Administrative Bureau. Many

diseases, like Alzheimer’s, can already be treated with Extra Potions...” I paused. “It’s probably better for this one to remain hidden though, at least until the day science catches up and can understand these fantasy items.”

Taking the feelings of parents into consideration, I was completely convinced of the need for treatments that could fix genetic diseases. However, modern science also showed promise in that regard with new gene therapies being developed. On the other hand, medicine as potent as this could end up harming humanity instead. After thinking for a bit, I put the Elixir card in the folder for the cards that needed to be kept hidden.

Next, I rolled the equipment gacha. I already had an SR weapon, Zantetsuken, but I wanted defensive equipment of that level too and did not yet own any.

Name: Spiritual Shield

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Can put up a barrier effective against both physical and magic attacks. The size and resistance of the barrier vary based on the user’s mental strength.

“Oh, this looks quite promising. I guess athletes could probably put up pretty strong barriers, thanks to their strong wills.”

Name: Black Steel Pavise Shield

Rarity: Rare

Description: A large shield made of the finest steel there is, black steel. Provides strong resistance to both physical and magic attacks.

“Finally! Some defensive equipment. I’ll keep these for future busters. It’d be good to have someone in charge of defense to guard everyone, two people in charge of physical attacks, two magicians, and one person who can heal or use buff spells. It may be quite useful to also get someone who can do long-range physical attacks, like an archer... I’ll keep all that in mind when picking out future members.”

The difficult part was that magic users were extremely rare. As of now, we

only had Emily and Mari. It seemed magic skills depended purely on natural talent too, so finding people who could use them wouldn't be easy.

“Wait. If I recall, didn't Akane say that a Magic Orb allows people to gain skills? It's probably an SR or UR Card, but is it in the item gacha?”

I rolled the item gacha again around fifty times and received some very unexpected items.

Name: Skill Orb (Basic Esoteric Magic)

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Allows one to gain the skill Elemental Magic. If one deepens their understanding of all six elements, they may gain the Applied Esoteric Magic skill.

Name: Skill Slots Expansion

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Use when all skills slots are full to gain an extra slot.

Name: Skill Eraser

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Allows one to erase a previously acquired skill. In some cases, another skill may appear to replace the one that has just been erased.

Name: Substitution Ring

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: If the user sustains enough damage to lead to death, this ring will shatter in their stead, leaving their body in perfect condition.

Name: Elixir Ring

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Protects the user against the following status changes: poison, paralysis, petrification, silence, and confusion.

Name: Sex Slavery Contract

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Can be used to convert a target into the user's sex slave when the user drips a drop of their own blood onto the contract and has the target sign it. The effect remains as long as the contract is intact.

“Every item up until the Elixir Ring is amazing,” I said, following a moment of silence. “Let’s use them. As for the last one... Let’s seal it forever and inform the Bureau, just in case.”

After putting the card in my special folder and locking it in a drawer, I set the Skill Slots Expansion card on the desk. Its effect was indeed amazing, too amazing for an SR card. It wouldn’t have been weird for it to be a UR or LR item.

It was as if the system was encouraging us to get stronger... In fact, if a person with bad intentions managed to obtain a skill that could control others’ minds, it would lead to a disastrous situation. Perhaps this was a trap laid by the system.

As the leader of the Dungeon Busters clan, I had to think of my members and carefully consider the way this card should be used. Skills that could bewitch or confuse the human mind existed, and people sometimes changed after gaining great powers. As such, it was certainly better to avoid bestowing skills that could easily be used to harm others on anyone, including myself.

In the end, I did not select a new skill and kept the slot empty. I still had a blank slot in my skill list, but I didn’t want to pick a skill yet because I might end up getting more options after ranking up.



[Yokohama Dungeon — Kirihara Amane]

We were currently fighting on Floor 4 of Yokohama Dungeon after having encountered kangaroo monsters. For some unknown reason, they wore red boxing gloves.

“Good grief! Boxing Kangaroos... Are we in an anime or what?!”

Name: Kirihara Amane

Title: None

Rank: D

Possession Limit: 12/29

Skills: Card Gacha, Whip Mastery (Lvl. 5), Discipline (Lvl. 1)

With a sharp woosh, I drove my whip right into the belly of the kangaroo. It let out a pitiful whine before turning into smoke. *Hmph. In the end, they are nothing more than beasts. I shall discipline them strictly.*

Kazuhiko-san, as I had decided to call him, watched me with a puzzled expression as I waved my whip around with one hand. *What is it? Do you also need a little discipline?*

“Hmm...” he hummed, trailing off. “You... This suits you. You’re doing great.”

“Am I?” I asked. “You know, I still haven’t hit a man with this whip of mine, and I kind of want to try it too... Interested?” I asked.

“I’ll pass,” said Kazuhiko-san. “All right. I saw how you guys fight. From now on, I’ll teach you how to rank up my way. It’s pretty straightforward. I just need the four of you to go stand in the middle of that intersection. The only thing you have to do is to keep fighting the kangaroos coming down the path in front of you. Shifu Liu, you simply need to stay in the middle and attract monsters.”

“I can easily do that, but isn’t this training a little too easy?” he asked.

That’s right. The four of us had already managed to reach Rank D by fighting in this dungeon. Floor 3 was now too easy for us, so we were now fighting monsters on Floor 4. We had also all obtained new skills.

In my case, I had obtained a pretty ridiculous skill called Discipline. I’d realized it might end up being useful, however, and was now considering using it as a means to control my men in the police department.

If you scraped the surface a little, men were nothing more than self-important perverts, after all. Some idiots even got pissed off at the mere thought of receiving orders from a woman. Even if I couldn’t get through to them with

words, I was sure that disciplining them with my whip would yield much better results.

“I received a report from Akira. Up until now, your training has been focused on both ranking up individually and working as a team. This was fine until Rank D. However, there is a huge difference between Rank D and Rank C. To break into Rank C, you need to surpass the limits of the human body. In other words, you can’t remain a normal human and reach Rank C. That’s where I come in. My training will make you go beyond human limits. You’ll keep fighting until you push past them,” Kazuhiko-san explained.

“So, how many do we need to fight?”

We had killed over ten thousand monsters so far and were far past the point of getting scared just because we were told things would be a little difficult. At least, that’s what I had believed until hearing Kazuhiko-san’s answer, when I became a little light-headed.

“It’s nothing much, really. If we assume each of you can kill one kangaroo in sixty seconds, that makes sixty kangaroos in an hour. Not counting time for breaks and sleep, you’d be fighting around fourteen hours per day, so that’s around 840 kangaroos. And you’ll keep doing this for 180 days in the dungeon.”

“What?”

“It’s a rough estimate, but you should kill around 150,000 monsters. Of course, I’ll keep increasing your weights as you go. Don’t worry too much. You’ll have time to eat, bathe, and sleep. A total of 180 days is simply like doing the Boot Camp six times. It’s not that long,” Kazuhiko-san said.

I saw the other three’s faces twitch. I probably had the exact same expression. Akira-san and Shifu Liu also wore strained smiles.

This guy is insane...

* * *

[Yokohama Dungeon — Shinohara Hisato]

In the month since my acceptance to Dungeon Busters, my world had changed in extreme ways. First of all, the pay I received was extraordinary.

Because of the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau's regulations, the miners in charge of gathering magic stones were only allowed to enter the dungeons for up to one hour in above ground time (or 144 hours in dungeon time) at a time. The Bureau put forward this rule after a light novel author brought up the possibility of PKing—or player killing. After much deliberation, a reservation system that allowed miners to reserve one-hour slots in the dungeon was put in place by the Bureau.

However, busters were treated differently. They could enter the dungeons whenever and for however long they wanted. Their only obligation was to reach out to the Bureau after returning to confirm they were still alive.

For this reason, we ended up harvesting many more magic stones than the average miner did. After twelve hours in the dungeon, we went back above ground for a shower before going to the safety zone on Floor 2 to sleep. We gathered more than ten kilograms of magic stones every single day by keeping up the same rhythm as we had during boot camp. Adding the magic stones and the cards I'd sold, my salary for the past month totaled over three million yen.

"Each of you has to kill 150,000 shooting kangaroos."

This was such a crazy number. The kangaroos on this floor each left behind 6 grams of magic stones upon being killed. This meant 900,000 grams had been collected from 150,000 monsters... In short, 900 kilograms! As for cards, they had a three percent chance to appear, so I'd get around 4,500 cards after killing 150,000 kangaroos. I planned to use up all my cards on the gacha in order to get Extra Potions, but I'd already be earning ninety million yen from the magic stones alone. For someone like me who had been a freeter just a month ago, imagining such numbers almost made me choke on my own spit.

"Once you all reach Rank C, we'll clear Yokohama Dungeon. I'm giving you a week to reach Rank C," said Kazu-san.

That's already my intention! I owed Kazu-san a debt, and I also had a dream of my own. There were tens of thousands of severely ill people in the world. My goal was to gather one hundred million Extra Potions. *For that sake, killing off 150,000 monsters is nothing!*

[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Truth be told, I could just as well have let Akira and Shifu Liu take care of the teaching when it came to fighting techniques. However, our first members were prime candidates for future leadership positions in Dungeon Busters. I needed to give them support—including emotional support. They had to learn how to consider the time limit and the aim of a fight rather than just single-mindedly head into battle. Formulate a theory. Test it. Reflect on it, and improve the process. Since they were people who were meant to become team leaders, I would teach them to fight in groups, while managing their teammates through various hands-on training methods.

Four above-ground days after starting this power-up training regimen, Rinko and Masayoshi reached Rank C. On the sixth day, Amane and Hisato joined them.

Name: Kusakabe Rinko

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 20/26

Skills: Card Gacha, Staff Mastery (Lvl. 7), Evasion (Lvl. 6)

Name: Sumida Masayoshi

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 16/22

Skills: Card Gacha, Shield Bash (Lvl. 8), Striking (Lvl. 5)

Name: Kirihara Amane

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 21/29

Skills: Card Gacha, Whip Mastery (Lvl. 7), Discipline (Lvl. 1)

Name: Shinohara Hisato

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 22/27

Skills: Card Gacha, Sword Mastery (Lvl. 4), Esoteric Magic (Lvl. 1)

“Shifu Liu, I have a question about Amane’s Discipline skill. Does it not level up?” I asked.

“Well, she hasn’t been disciplining anyone, has she?” Shifu Liu asked in lieu of a reply. “She could try it on monsters to begin with. It should also work on humans, of course.”

“I see. Amane, do you want to try going to an S&M Club in Akebono?”

I meant this as a joke, but a whip suddenly entered my field of vision. An attack from a C-Ranker... I narrowly managed to dodge, but I might have been in trouble had Amane been serious.

“I intend to summon a doglike monster at some point. If I train it, I suppose the skill will level up. Or would you rather offer yourself up in its stead?” Amane asked.

I put my hands on both her shoulders to calm her down. As expected of a former police superintendent, she had no qualms about using men. She also wasn’t childish enough to actually get mad in such a situation.

“All of you have managed to reach Rank C. Let’s wrap things up for today and take a rest tomorrow. We’ll move in to clear Yokohama Dungeon the day after that. Oh, and Hisato. You need to learn how to use magic, don’t you? I’ll bring along Emily, the LR card, the day after tomorrow, so you should learn from her.”

In this way, all the conditions to clear Yokohama Dungeon had finally been met.



[Vatican State]

Three groups left Adriana Square through the Via dei Corridori and made their way to St. Peter’s Square, the entrance of the Vatican, bearing flags very few people still knew of nowadays. The first group bore the flag of the Knights Templar—black on top, white on the bottom, and a red cross at its center. The second group bore the flag of the Teutonic Order—white on top, black on the bottom, and a white and black cross at its center. Finally, the last group bore the flag of the Knights Hospitaller—a shining white cross upon a bright red background.

The crowd rejoiced. The Three Great Chivalric Orders that had once set out to retake the Holy Land in the name of God were now reborn.

“In the past, His Holiness Pope Urban II called upon his people to take up arms and reclaim the Holy Land during the Council of Clermont. More than a thousand years later, it is now my turn to call upon you. I ask you: where does God reside?”

Two hours after the Three Great Chivalric Orders had entered the Curia, Pope Francesco began a speech that was simultaneously broadcast all over the world. An impressive crowd of the faithful had gathered in St. Peter’s Square, and 1.3 billion Catholics around the world had tuned in, listening silently to the pope’s address.

“During the past one thousand years, science has advanced greatly, but along with this progress, something has disappeared from the hearts of the people. Fear. Once, people cowered in fear at the sound of heaven’s roar and reflected upon their actions. People sought forgiveness for every storm, flood, famine, and pestilence. A thousand years ago, men were helpless when facing the might of nature. Science took away that fear and replaced it with theories and explanations. However, the hearts of men cannot be changed, no matter how science may advance.”

Sobbing could be heard from the crowd. Devotees cast their eyes to the sky, letting their tears flow freely, repenting and praying for forgiveness.

“Now, we have witnessed the appearance of dungeons, a phenomenon that

science is unable to explain. I cannot think of such things as the work of God. Therefore, I believe that, in time, science shall explain what the dungeons truly are. However, what do the dungeons, which have appeared before our eyes, and the monsters that dwell inside them inspire in your hearts? Do you not feel the same fear our ancestors experienced more than a thousand years ago? Oh, how vast and abyssal is the universe? It is within the fear and humbleness that we feel in the face of the greatness of the world that our Lord resides. Science cannot verify this, nor is there a need to verify it at all, for we all know this answer in our hearts.”

Pope Francesco continued.

“There is something I wish to say to scientists, philosophers, economists, politicians...” His Holiness paused. “To everyone. Do not feel ashamed of your fearful and humble hearts. Being afraid of unknown entities, such as the dungeons, and seeking refuge is a natural reaction for us human beings. If prayers soothe your heart, then pray. Whether you are Catholic, Buddhist, or Muslim...pray. It is by no means a fruitless endeavor. As you offer your heart in prayer, you will surely find God.”

The thousands of people who filled St. Peter’s Square silently got on their knees, closed their eyes, and joined their hands in prayer. Similar scenes were spotted around the world.

“Prayers to our Lord shall soothe your fearful hearts. However, God will not erase the source of that anguish, the dungeons. It is a trial that we, the people, must face on our own. In the same way we have faced and come to understand nature over the past thousand years, we must now stand up to the dungeons and emerge victorious. I believe the time has come to once again raise our flags and our swords. The Catholic Church will fight against the dungeons, devoting our hearts to our Lord. I, Pope Francesco, will now issue my command. I declare war upon the dungeons. The military orders that have long supported the faith shall once again depart on a Crusade to subjugate the dungeons. The road will be long and treacherous, but we shall, without doubt, rise to the occasion. The day we take back the Holy Land, and peace returns to our hearts, shall soon come.”

The whole of St. Peter’s Square fell completely silent as the Pope’s speech

came to an end. Suddenly, someone whispered. Many voices joined his, and soon, the clamor was enough to shake the ground on which they stood.

“Deus vult!”



[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On Floor 5 of Yokohama Dungeon, we came face-to-face with the same monster that had swarmed Floor 3 of Sendai Dungeon—hellhounds. Their pitch-black fur made it appear as though they were ablaze with black flames as they shot balls of ebony fire from their mouths.

Amane brought down her whip, which traveled as fast as sound as it cut through the air. The hellhound dodged, kicking the wall to pick up speed as it flew right over Masayoshi’s shield.

However, this was well within the expectations of the four busters. Rinko and Hisato stood on both sides of the hellhound leaping at them, their weapons at the ready.

“Aaah!”

“Yaah!”

Hit simultaneously by both a staff and a sword, the hellhound turned to smoke before it could even land.

Lead the enemy where you wanted it to go using the whip before killing it off midair while it couldn’t run. This attack pattern was the result of the cooperation between the four of them.

“So? What are your thoughts on fighting a Rank C monster for the first time?” I asked.

The four looked at each other before Amane, the eldest, spoke.

“As expected, they can’t be compared to Rank D monsters in either power or speed. Back when we were Rank E, we could still kind of deal with Rank D monsters, but fighting Rank C monsters while still being Rank D would have been quite reckless. Even as we are now, we only managed to win because we cooperated and attacked together. I think it would be a different story if we had

tried to fight it one-on-one. In the future, we will also have teams. That's why you're making us practice team fights, right?"

"That's right," I said. "Each of you will lead a six-person team and continue to fight to clear the dungeons. I'm currently recruiting new busters who will potentially join you. We'll decide the teams and have everyone meet at the end of March when our HQ is finally completed. Until then, I'll consider the rules and different criteria I'll use to evaluate them. After we're done clearing Yokohama Dungeon, I hope you can also give me your opinions."

When March came, we would get quite busy with the move. It would also be when the Crusaders sent by the Vatican would arrive. This was why I very much wanted to be done with Yokohama Dungeon within the week. After that, a trip for all Dungeon Busters employees was planned. I intended to take that chance to announce my plans for the future of Dungeon Busters.

"The next one's there!"

A lebludor had appeared. *Fighting with Rank C members will be a great experience for them. Let's have them fight on Floor 5 for the whole day.*

* * *

[Ministry of Defense — Ishihara Yukie]

Dungeon Busters's contract stipulated that Yokohama Dungeon was to be cleared before the next wave of dungeon emergencies, which would be March 6. However, they sure worked fast! They might even clear it before February was over. On top of that, four of their members had already reached Rank C. From what I had heard in secret from my friend, the Gamerican soldiers that had been chosen to form a special unit were still dawdling at Rank D. Having earned the title "Species Limit Breaker" would surely become an important criterion for adventurers in the future.

<Floor 5 has doglike monsters, lebludors. Floor 6 has bearlike monsters, devil grizzlies. Floor 7 has lionlike... Hang on. How do you read this? Teufel...>

"Teufel löwe? That means devil lion in German, right? I'm not quite sure why their name would be in German..." I said. "And what about Floor 8?"

On the screen appeared the face of a man along with the Monster Card I had

just scanned. The second image the man showed was of a straight path, similar to the one that had been on the bottom floor of Sapporo Dungeon.

<Yokohama Dungeon has eight floors in total. The bottom floor seems to be the same as the last one we saw. As for the relief on the ceiling...>

The footage changed, and without thinking, I leaned forward. From what I could see, a monster that looked like the devil was on the verge of being swallowed by swirling lines, its expression one of anguish. It was rather hard to see the details clearly, since there was no color, but the relief seemed to show some sort of demonic being just before it was destroyed.

“This is pretty strange. What do you think it represents?”

The man on the screen shrugged. He told me that the only thing he could say for now was that if we assumed each of the 666 dungeons had a different relief on its bottom floor, we’d surely understand the story as we cleared more dungeons. I agreed.

There were still numerous other dungeons. How long would it take to clear all of them? Four days had already passed since the latest recruits of Dungeon Busters had reached Rank C. Although we still had a lot of time until the deadline, I couldn’t help but feel impatient.

“You only took one day to clear Sapporo Dungeon after starting your investigation, but you seem to be spending more time on this one, taking around one day per floor. Is there a reason for this?”

<That’s because I was sure we’d be able to clear Sapporo Dungeon from the start. I’m not as certain about this one. Four of my members reached Rank C very recently. I’m also going slower to allow them to get used to dungeon clearing. Don’t worry. After we’re done with Yokohama Dungeon, I’ll give all four of them teams to lead. They’ll all work independently to clear dungeons after that point. The number of busters will also gradually grow. I’ll make sure we’re able to clear every single dungeon by the deadline.>

It seemed he had somehow sensed my worries. If only one team tried to clear every single dungeon, they would have to maintain a pace of one dungeon every four days in order to be finished before the ten-year limit. When taking travel time between the dungeons into consideration, it was pretty much

impossible. That was why Dungeon Busters aimed to become a clan that would foster several parties. It probably wouldn't be long before numerous parties were sent out all over the world to clear dungeons independently.

<We're still only at the initial stage. For now, I don't mind even if our pace is as slow as one dungeon a month. What truly matters is allowing busters to develop their cooperation skills and helping them grow into full-fledged adventurers. Standardizing the training process and putting a system into place that will continuously allow new busters to be trained is the most important thing right now.>

"You're the one who built this organization. I'll leave it to you. You're challenging the bottom floor tomorrow, right? Be careful."

After cutting communication, I went to the reunion room where I was currently holding discussions to put a new system for the Ministry of Defense in place.

* * *

[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Clearing Yokohama in a day was certainly possible if I wished. However, I wanted to avoid rushing through fights since my members had just recently reached Rank C. It had taken me a long time to break through to Rank B after reaching Rank C, and even Akira had needed more or less a whole month. Even Species Limit Breakers were still people. As such, time was needed to get used to fighting—and overall living—inside the dungeons.

Right outside of the Guardian's room, I stopped to explain what I knew to the other four.

"All right. We're on the bottom floor. At the end of this straight path awaits the Dungeon Core. It was the same in Sapporo. The Dungeon Core will be protected by a Guardian that will either be of the same rank or one rank higher than the dungeon itself. Keep in mind that, although I'm saying *a* guardian, there may actually be several."

To be on the safe side, I materialized Akane, Emily, and Liu Fengguang. The Guardian of Sapporo Dungeon—a Rank D dungeon—had been Rank C. It was

very much possible that a Rank B Guardian would show up here.

After checking that everything was ready, Rinko pushed on the gate. Both doors opened slowly.

“There only seems to be one Guardian, huh. Is that a hyena?”

In the back of the room, a monster that looked very much like a hyena was sleeping, curled up on the floor. It rose sluggishly, proving itself quite big, easily over two meters tall. Fixing its cherry-red eyes on us, it showed its fangs.

“This is a hell hyena,” Akane said, explaining what type of monster it was. “It’s a Rank C monster, but it’s able to summon Rank D familiars that will fight alongside it. As long as the red-eyed leader isn’t defeated, it’ll keep on calling more and more familiars.”

“I see. Rinko, Masayoshi, Amane, Hisato, the four of you should try to fight it on your own for now. If the situation gets out of hand, we’ll help you.”

Clearing a dungeon without any help would give them a boost of confidence. I hoped they could finish this on their own, if possible. However, the hyena seemed tougher than I had first expected.

Several white circles popped up on the floor, and in a few seconds, over ten smaller hyenas had appeared.

“Hyenas truly do hunt in packs, huh. Four against twelve...” I paused. “Is that a bit too much for you?”

“Please let the four of us try for now! If it becomes dangerous, you have to come and help us though, all right?”

“It’s coming!”

Masayoshi raised his shield. Two groups of four hyenas tried to go around him on either side while the rest charged him head-on.

“I’ll block the left side with my magic!” Hisato yelled. “Rinko, Amane, please take care of the ones on the right!”

Hisato used Fire Arrow, the spell he had learned from Emily, effectively stopping the hyenas in their tracks. As for Masayoshi, he managed to push back against the three monsters that had lunged at him, deflecting them to the right

where Amane's whip waited for them. Even if there were a bunch of them, hyenas were still only Rank D monsters. Four Rank C adventurers working together could handle them without any issue.

However, the second Rinko and Amane finished off the monsters on their side, another wave appeared out of thin air. It seemed the leader could only summon up to eleven monsters at once.

"Rinko! You're the fastest among us! We'll distract the small fries, so go and kill off the boss!"

"Got it!"

Since Masayoshi was carrying a Monster Satchel, the hyenas were all immediately drawn to him, and he fought them using his skills Shield Bash and Striking. Rinko used this opportunity to finish off the boss in one go.

"ROOOOARRR!!!"

Just as Rinko was about to strike, the boss roared. It raised its right forepaw, making a circular motion.

Rinko immediately switched to a defensive stance. A loud sound rang out as dozens of small cuts suddenly appeared all over her arms and legs.

"Did she get cut by the sheer force of the impact reverberating in the air?" I asked.

"No, that's not it," Emily said. She had simply been watching the four as they fought, but her expression was now grim. "It imbued its claws with wind magic. It's impressive that she was able to block it even though she had never seen this attack before, but I believe it'll make fighting the hell hyena in close combat quite difficult..."

"Well, guess I'll go help," I said after thinking it over for a few seconds.

As I grabbed Zantetsuken, Akira put his hand on my shoulder and shook his head. I immediately understood Akira's intention just by looking at his face. He was saying they could still fight and that we should simply watch over them as long as we possibly could.

After blocking the first attack, Rinko had changed strategies and now dodged

every hit, probably by using Evasion. As for the other three, they had suffered a few injuries but were steadily defeating monsters.

“I see...” Rinko said. “I think I’ve got it. It can’t keep on summoning familiars while using wind magic, and...”

Rinko charged straight at the boss. In response, it raised its paw once more, unleashing a blast of wind magic. Rinko ducked and slid across the floor, successfully dodging the invisible blade, and thrust her staff right inside the hell hyena’s mouth.



“It can only attack in a straight line!”

Rinko’s staff pierced right through the monster’s skull, splashing blood all over.

* * *

[Kusakabe Rinko]

The four of us had sustained minor injuries, but no one was seriously wounded. Potions would be enough to heal ourselves.

Kazu-san and Akira-san clapped for us. As for Shifu Liu, he nodded as he stroked his beard, looking quite satisfied.

“Splendid work, all four of you. We didn’t even need to raise a finger. The credit is all yours,” Shifu Liu said.

He was right. The four of us had successfully cleared a Rank C dungeon. We might not have been able to get this far without Shifu Liu, Kazu-san, and the others, but this last victory was something we had seized with our own power. My heart filled with joy. The other three seemed to feel the same, and we all raised our fists, shouting excitedly.

A black octahedron suddenly appeared right before our eyes. The Dungeon Core.

Hisato prepped the camera. We were going to film the moment the dungeon was officially cleared as evidence.

“All right, let’s go clear this dungeon for real. As we discussed beforehand, Akira will be the one to claim this dungeon. Of course, the revenue of the dungeon will go to Dungeon Busters. I want Akira to claim the dungeon this time so that he can get the Buster title. It will come in handy when trying to clear other dungeons. Eventually, I want all of you to obtain this title,” said Kazu-san.

It had been decided that, at least for now, ten percent of the proceeds from magic stone sales coming from a dungeon would be given to the dungeon master. A law still needed to be passed by the National Diet, but considering the majority of the ruling party and a good chunk of the opposition were in

favor, it would surely become official by next month. Naturally, this money would go straight to our clan, Dungeon Busters, to be used as operating funds. What Akira-san was actually getting was nothing more than the Buster title.

Akira-san placed a hand on the Dungeon Core. The dungeon’s Status window popped up right in front of the black crystal, just as Kazu-san had told us.

Dungeon No.:	69
Rank:	C
Master:	None
Qty. of Floors:	008
Supplied DE:	1059
Resource:	Black Magic Crystal
Stampede:	On
<Do you wish to claim administrative rights? Y / N>	
<Do you wish to erase this dungeon? Y / N>	

“Akira, please claim administrative rights,” said Kazu-san.

Akira-san’s name appeared on the screen as he pressed “Yes,” making him the master of the dungeon as a strange voice suddenly filled the room.

<Dungeon No. 69 has been cleared. Shishido Akira has been granted the title of Buster. Furthermore, you are hereby granted the LR character card “N’gie the Warhammer Giant” as a reward for being the first to clear a Rank C dungeon.>

Name:	N’gie
Title:	Warhammer Giant
Rank:	F
Rarity:	Legend Rare
Skills:	Shield Mastery (Lvl. 1), Hammer Mastery (Lvl. 1), Guardian Barrier (Lvl. 1)

Just as Akira-san tried to read the card that had just appeared, it started to shine and change form. Before our eyes, a giant, massive as a wall, materialized. I instinctively took a step back. The giant didn't even need to move; its mere existence felt like a threat.

"Hmm? I... Where...? Someone call me?"

The two-and-a-half-meter-tall giant looked around, seeming a bit lost. He scratched his head as he tilted his imposing, square face with its strong jawline.

"N'gie the Warhammer Giant, welcome to the human world. The one who summoned you is this man, Shishido Akira, the master of this dungeon. We are the Dungeon Busters. Our goal is to clear every single dungeon in the world. Would you agree to...help us...?" Kazu-san trailed off.

"Zz... Zzz..."

Unexpectedly, the giant called N'gie didn't listen to Kazu-san at all. He had already fallen back asleep and was drooling slightly. Kazu-san had a blank look on his face. Akira-san poked the giant's side, who twitched in reaction.

"Hmm? What?"

"N'gie. Please lend us your strength," Kazu-san said again, summing it up in only a few words.

N'gie looked down at Kazu-san and nodded. "I... I not smart... Is okay?"

"That's not an issue at all."

"E...Everyone say... I just big. I... Blockhead who just eats a lot..." N'gie muttered.

In spite of his words, he didn't look pained.

"You're *just* big? Isn't that good enough?" Kazu-san laughed. "Your big body is already a talent in itself. The blockheads were the people around you who couldn't help you use your talent to its full potential. If you protect everyone by standing before us, we'll feel safe. That's the very purpose of a Tank."

"I...stupid, so I don't really get it. But... If I can be useful...I work hard," said N'gie.

“I’ll be counting on you, then. And don’t worry. We’ll make sure you get as much food as you like. For now, please turn back into a card.”

The giant did as he was asked. Since he was an LR character, he was surely strong, but... Would he really be okay?

Kazu-san put the card into his folder and turned to face us.

“As you can see, character cards sometimes appear unexpectedly. All of you will probably acquire some sooner or later as we keep clearing dungeons. Also...” Kazu-san paused. “I meant what I told N’gie. Everyone has their strengths. The role of a leader is to identify these strengths and allow the members of their team to cultivate them. You will soon lead teams of your own. Try to make use of your teammates’ talents in the best possible way.”

Kazu-san had already said something similar in the past. Nurturing someone’s character or changing their core values took time and effort. Whether they would change or not was ultimately up to the individual. However, taking advantage of the strengths a person already had and helping them be confident was doable. That was why Dungeon Busters aimed to implement a system in which its members were encouraged to develop their talents.

“Aniki, I turned off the Stampede. The number on the screen is the same as the one we saw in Sapporo.”

Kazu-san frowned before nodding silently. I also felt somewhat depressed. There was no room for doubt anymore. The Monster Stampede would occur. Taking into account the dungeons that had yet to appear, we needed to clear a mind-boggling 664 more dungeons.

“All right, let’s head back above ground! We’re gonna have a blast tonight!” Akira-san suddenly said, laughing and waving his hands as if to dispel the tense atmosphere.

We went back to Floor 1 and climbed the stairs. Exiting the tent that covered up the whole area of the dungeon, I couldn’t help but squint my eyes in the bright sunlight.



Kazuhiko]

Three days after clearing Yokohama Dungeon, I was asked to act as a witness during a reunion of the Anti-Dungeon Measures Committee held by the House of Representatives. The bottom floor of Yokohama Dungeon had been fully claimed by researchers, but the first three floors were now open to civilian adventurers, and boot camps were being held.

The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau's plan to split adventurers into two categories—miners and busters—and let the busters keep ten percent of revenue from the magic stones mined in the dungeons they had cleared needed to become an official law before it could be applied.

Besides, rather than going through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we needed a dedicated organization that handled dungeon policies to be able to respond promptly to the requests for cooperation we had received from several countries, such as the Oriental Republic of Sina, as well as the EU and the Vatican. The Diet was currently discussing establishing a new “Ministry of Dungeons” for just this reason.

The decision to make it a ministry rather than an office or a bureau was based on the fact that the dungeons were a worldwide phenomenon and that, although dealing with them carried many risks, they could also prove extremely lucrative. The worth of the dungeons wasn't only in the magic stones that could be turned into a new source of energy, but also the tremendous implications dungeons had for every scientific field. They were sure to become tremendously valuable as time went on. On top of that, the risk that the Monster Stampede posed was colossal, threatening the whole of humanity.

Simply put, there was no way a regular government office could bear such heavy responsibilities. An organization on the level of a ministry was the bare minimum needed in order to manage the dungeons in an efficient, centralized manner.

For now, I had to answer questions from the committee members of both the ruling and opposition parties regarding the dungeons. Some had a fairly reliable understanding of the situation, while others' perceptions of the dungeons was far-off from the reality of things. For instance, one of the members of the

Constitutional Democratic Party...

“I would like to ask our witness a question. Do you not think that the current rate of purchasing one gram of magic stone for one hundred yen is excessive? In Yokohama, for instance, civilian adventurers are allowed to enter the dungeon for one hour at a time and earn one hundred thousand yen on average. In just one mere hour. Is it not too much?”

I was stunned by the figure he had just brought up.

“Please allow me to answer. After hearing this specific figure, I must say that I am shocked. Do they only earn as little as one hundred thousand yen? On Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon, one can gain three grams of magic stone for each monster killed. One hour above ground is equivalent to 144 hours in the dungeon. Let’s assume around half that time is spent mining for magic stones. Every thirty seconds, they defeat a monster, keeping up that pace for twelve hours before taking a break. They would then repeat this cycle six times before one hour above ground passes. With this calculation, they should be earning over two million yen. If they work five days a week, that would mean ten million yen per week and approximately four hundred million yen per year for two hundred working days. I thought this would be the bare minimum for any adventurer, but it seems the miners slack off more than I expected.”

“What I asked you was whether you think the pay is too high or not. Please answer the question.”

“I absolutely do not think it is. Even if we go with my estimate of four hundred million yen per year, two hundred working days above ground are equivalent to 144 times more in the dungeon. It would be roughly eighty days. If you think of things this way, it means you would earn around five million yen per working year in reality. If you think this is too much, I urge you to also divide your salary by 144.”

Did he think he was being smart by arguing based on nothing but his own little idealistic view? He didn’t even stop to consider the reality of things. Anyone who has worked in the private sector for a few years would immediately notice this argument made no sense...

Thankfully, some of the legislators had given the issue serious thought. I was

asked whether I thought the JSDF could fight off monsters in case they were to escape from the dungeons. Of course, I could only offer one answer: I did not know.

“I have no way of confirming whether the monsters can be killed with firearms, so I cannot give a clear answer. However, I believe that high-ranking monsters will be formidable foes surpassing anything we may imagine. This is only a conjecture, but I assume that the JGSDF will surely need to focus all its firepower to defeat one Rank S monster. If it helps you picture it, please imagine they’d be akin to the monsters that show up in movies. If such monsters appear by the thousands, humanity will be doomed in less than a day.”

“Then, as expected, we should focus our efforts on strengthening our defense forces, should we not?”

“We surely need to bolster our defenses. However, I believe the best course of action is to focus on nurturing as many Rank S adventurers as we possibly can and aim to stop the Monster Stampede before it even begins.”

After finishing my work as a witness, I walked to the Ministry of Defense. I had a meeting with the person in charge of the International Policy Division to prepare for the arrival of the Crusaders.

“The six members of the Crusaders will arrive tomorrow night at Narita Airport. We will meet with them here the following day at ten. They have already been informed.”

“I’ve had a look at their profiles. They seem to be quite unique.”

[Teutonic Order]

■Rolf Schnabel (Man — 23 years old)

■Alberta Reigenbach (Woman — 20 years old)

[Knights Hospitaller]

■Léonard Chartres (Man — 21 years old)

■Chloe Fontaine (Woman — 19 years old)

[Knights Templar]

■Franca Bezzini (Woman — 22 years old)

■Marco Montale (Man — 19 years old)

“The eldest is Rolf Schnabel of the Teutonic Order. He’s a philosophy major at university, huh? I expected a theology student or someone from a monastery.”

“The theology course at his university seems to focus on Protestantism, which isn’t quite the same as Catholicism. You were worried about how pious they might be, but although their parents all occupy important positions in the Three Great Chivalric Orders, they seem to have diverse backgrounds. Léonard Chartres, of the Knights Hospitaller, studies at the Seminary of Ars in Flavigny and is quite devout, but Chloe Fontaine, for instance, seems to want to become a mangaka. She doesn’t even attend university...”

I wanted to know their personalities. I intended to assess what kind of people they were from their personal history and goals. I had also asked them to study Japanese, but I hadn’t specified any specific method they should use. I’d be able to see how seriously they took things from the progress they’d made. If the Vatican had put together this group just for show, I didn’t intend to train them seriously either.

If it were me, I’d have made use of the dungeon in Rome to study. One week would become two and a half years. That was enough time to at least learn the basics of a language. *I wonder what they chose to do.*

During the meeting, I kept thinking about how I should also start dedicating some time to learning languages, starting with English and Chinese, if I wanted to clear dungeons abroad.



[Narita International Airport — Rolf Schnabel]

Getting off the plane at Narita Airport, I put on my Rosenstock sunglasses and

went to pick up my Rimowa suitcase from the baggage conveyor. Alberta, a girl roughly a head shorter than I, stood by my side. She picked up her Zero Halliburton carry-on and another piece of luggage that looked like a ski bag. I checked the time on my Lange & Söhne watch and frowned. We had ended up using way more time than planned on the entry formalities. We only had five minutes left before our meeting time.

“Let’s hurry. The Japanese are as particular as we are about timeliness,” I said.

“Wait,” said Alberta. “Marco and Franca aren’t here yet.”

I clicked my tongue before I could stop myself. The Italians truly had a completely different approach to time management compared to us Reichmen. We would always be on time, while they assumed the meeting time was actually the moment they were supposed to get out of bed. Marco was especially bad in that regard.

After a while, Marco finally appeared. He was chatting with the Italian woman who had boarded her flight at Fiumicino Airport. *Why did a guy like him even bother coming?*

“You’re late, Marco. We were on the same plane, so how come you ended up disembarking fifteen minutes later?” Alberta reprimanded, brows furrowed.

His cellphone was still in hand as he approached. The two had probably just exchanged numbers.

“See? I told you we should arrive on time! Rolf and Alberta are serious people from Reich. You can’t keep them waiting!” Franca Bezzini said, looking exasperated.

You’re showing up at the same time as him though, aren’t you?! Italians really weren’t punctual... I was starting to get slightly worried. Would we really be able to cooperate efficiently in these conditions?

As for the two Franzians, Léonard Chartres had the serious, sober behavior expected of a seminary student, but Chloe Fontaine was an oddball. Some sort of weird pink plastic stick with a huge, heart-shaped thing on top stuck out from the paper bag she held. *What could she possibly use that thing for?*

“Waaah! This is the country I’ve always dreamed of visiting!” Chloe yelled.

“Nihon! Lyrica Moe lives here!”

This whole situation was giving me a headache. Alberta had already taken a step back, putting some more distance between the two of them.

Well, I sure am worried now.

* * *

[Alberta Reigenbach]

We went from the airport to our hotel in the city and rested for one night before hurrying on our way to the center of Japan’s national defense, the Ministry of Defense. Some idiot had made us late.

“The meeting starts at ten. We should have arrived ten minutes early so that we had the time to go to the meeting room. Now, we’ll barely reach the building by ten. We’ll probably be at least five minutes late,” Rolf muttered.

“Come on. A mere five minutes doesn’t count as being late. We’re full-fledged Italians, all right? At this hour, we should be having an espresso, not going somewhere. The meeting being scheduled so early is the real issue!” Marco answered immediately.

The two of them kept on arguing endlessly. *Good grief*. They didn’t get along at all. Rolf was meticulous and serious, whereas Marco was sloppy and irresponsible... They also weren’t children anymore, though, so they managed to tone down their altercations somewhat.

The truly strange one was Chloe. When I saw her clothes this morning, I had been utterly shocked. Her liking manga and anime was one thing, but wearing a short pink-and-white dress with frills along with white gloves that went up all the way to her elbows and a huge red ribbon in her light-brown hair was another thing entirely.

“Chloe, you do know we’re going to a very important meeting with government officials and members of Dungeon Busters, right? Are you sure you want to wear this?” I couldn’t help but warn her.

“I’m wearing this *because* it’s an important meeting! This is how a magical girl should dress! If someone complains, I’ll finish them off with my Shining Stick!”

I immediately lost the will to give her any more advice. Although Japan had treasures such as the wabi-sabi aesthetic, anime was also a part of their culture. On one hand, there was the dignified world of samurai. On the other hand, there was the flashy, shallow, immature world of anime... I supposed this diversity was one of the reasons I appreciated Japan so much. *However, there should still be limits.* Chloe was definitely going overboard...

“We have been awaiting you. I shall take you to the meeting room.”

We arrived at the Ministry of Defense a little past ten. The doorman was already waiting for us and immediately showed us to the meeting room. As we entered the building, a man who looked like he might have been a secretary awaited us. For a second, he appeared surprised by Chloe’s outfit, but he did not comment on it and quickly led us to the meeting room. It was finally time to meet the world’s greatest adventurers—the Dungeon Busters. I entered the meeting room, expectant. A few Japanese men and women were already sitting there, waiting for us. One middle-aged man in particular seemed to be in a terrible mood.

* * *

[Ministry of Defense — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

For any working adult, arriving five minutes early was the most basic of basics. I was already at the building having a smoke at 9:40, and I’d gotten to the meeting room ten minutes before we were supposed to start. Even after waiting ten additional minutes, they still hadn’t shown up, however. They finally arrived around twenty minutes after I had first entered the room.

This wasn’t some sort of date. This was a crucial meeting that several important government officials had accepted to join. Arriving ten minutes late to such an important event... Were these kids even taking us seriously?

“We’re extremely sorry for being late. Please accept our apologies.”

A blonde woman wearing a suit bowed and apologized in Japanese as soon as she stepped into the room. I already knew her face from the pictures. That was Alberta Reigenbach. After her, a man with a haircut similar to that of a soccer player—blond on top and, short, neatly trimmed dark brown hair on the sides—entered and bowed. Rolf Schnabel. He also wore a suit. Those two seemed to

have some common sense.

“Sorry we’re kinda late! ♪”

A woman with light brown hair wearing a ridiculous outfit entered next, offering an extremely casual apology. Chloe Fontaine. She seemed to be able to speak Japanese at least.

“Je vous prie de m’excuser.”

A brown-haired man wearing a jacket and a pair of slacks followed suit, looking quite apologetic. I didn’t understand the language he spoke. Probably French?

“Scusate.”

Finally, a black-haired man wearing casual clothes—a colorful shirt under a sweater and a pair of jeans—and a red-haired girl wearing a leather jacket and a pair of jeans entered.

To be honest, I had already lost all motivation at this point. I considered going straight home, but Director General Ishihara, who was sitting next to me, lightly stepped on my foot. She shook her head slightly. I had no choice but to stay. The Crusaders took their places in front of us. The International Policy Division’s chief and assistant manager as well as five other officials sat on our side beside Director General Ishihara and I.

“Well then, it is a bit later than planned, but I would like to officially start this meeting. I am Ishihara Yukie, Director General of the Defense Ministry’s Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. It is an honor for me to welcome the six Crusaders who have been handpicked by the Vatican.”

Ishihara greeted them in Japanese. All of them wore earphones and listened to the simultaneous interpretation in their respective languages.

An honor? Don’t make me laugh.

I was fairly certain that the thirty-something-looking—although she was actually closer to fifty—career woman who had just introduced herself felt the same way I did.

Each of us stood up one after the other to give a few words of introduction. In

my case, I kept it extremely simple, only saying, “I’m Ezoe Kazuhiko from Dungeon Busters.” I had no interest in these guys anymore.

I thought the six of them would introduce themselves in their native tongues, but Alberta Reigenbach and Chloe Fontaine spoke in Japanese.

“My name is Alberta Reigenbach. I’m delighted to be able to once again set foot upon this land. I strive to train as hard as possible to honor the Crusaders’ name,” said Alberta.

“I’m the magical girl Chloe Fontaine! Call me Chloe-tan, all right? ♪”

The first one gave a proper introduction. However, I couldn’t help but think that the second girl was messing with us. If they were skilled, had achieved great things, or were famous, it would still be surprising, though less unnerving. As things stood, they pretty much represented the Crusaders and had come here to learn, fully sponsored by the Vatican State. The reputation of the Vatican State and the Catholic Church rested on their shoulders. Were they even aware of their responsibilities?

This was why, after everyone finished introducing themselves, I leaned back in my chair, looking down on the bunch of twenty-something kids in front of me.

“Why did you even bother coming to Japan?” I asked.



[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

To correct the behavior of a bunch of unruly kids, pain was the way to go. However, these guys were even worse than I had assumed. Thus, I decided to take them to Yokohama Dungeon immediately after the meeting ended. I had the right to request that Yokohama Dungeon remain available for us to use for five days, just in case.

“This is Yokohama Dungeon. We can take our time here. For the next five days, I want you all to learn Japanese. You’ll study for twelve hours every day. Including some time to eat and shower, this should be more or less one aboveground hour. You’ll repeat this cycle 120 times. That gives you more or less 1,440 hours to study. You should at least reach a conversational level by

then, right?”

“Wait, I have no use for this!” Alberta interjected.

“She’s right! I don’t need to either...” Chloe chimed in.

“Collective responsibility. You guys are a team, right? You should have already met one another in Rome. Weren’t you all told to study Japanese at that time? Well, don’t worry too much about it. If some of you can speak Japanese already, you can help the others finish faster. I’ll quiz you in three days. If you manage to pass, I’ll let you come back above ground. I’m telling you this just in case, but don’t try to escape, all right? I’ll have a dungeon exploration team made of experienced JGSDF soldiers monitoring you.”

“We’ve been chosen by His Holiness the Pope himself to become Crusaders, you know!” Chloe began. “Do you think you won’t have any issues treating us like— Aaah!”

I grabbed the blabbermouth magical girl by the throat with one hand.

“Shut up. The Pope? Crusaders? Do I look like I care? I’ll give it to you straight. The Vatican already told us that they don’t care if you guys die. We’re inside a dungeon. This is a hell where the Pope’s authority and your beliefs don’t matter at all,” I said, releasing her.

I spared a glance at the girl coughing uncontrollably before looking at the rest of them.

“Aren’t you the ones who are sorely mistaken? Depending on the way you act, the honor of the Chivalric Orders as well as the history of the Catholic Church and their Crusaders will be stained. What do you think the hundreds of millions of Catholics would think if they saw your current state? You have two choices. Either you shut your mouths and start learning Japanese or you pack your little things up, run away, and turn the Vatican and the Catholic Church into a joke. Which is it gonna be?”

I gestured at the interpreter so that he would translate what I had just said. Perhaps they had finally understood their position because their faces tensed slightly as they listened.

* * *

[Marco Montale]

Good grief. Kazuhiko Ezoe sure was troublesome. In Italie, being a bright, cheerful person was a good quality, all right? He acted as if he were the hero of some tragedy. There was no way we'd ever get along, but I guess what he said wasn't wrong. We'd been handpicked by the Curia to become Crusaders. If we didn't produce any results, the authority of the Church established by our ancestors would crumble.

We needed to become stronger, and if we had to learn Japanese to achieve that goal, then so be it. However... The common habit of the Japanese and the Reichmen to pursue their goal as if they were staring down some calamity sure was annoying. There was no need to act so dramatic, was there? We could stay chill and get things done. *That's the Italian way.*

* * *

[Franca Bezzini]

Why do I need to study? Sure, the old geezer went on and on about the "honor of the Catholic Church," but I didn't care about any of that... I hadn't even attended church recently. The last time I'd gone was when I was a kid. I haven't even read the Bible, so even if you preach to me about the Crusaders... I had joined mostly because the reward was attractive for someone who didn't work, like me.

Anyway, I didn't see why I should learn a whole new language. In the first place, my Italian was already wonky. How many years had it even been since I last held a pencil in my hand? Well, it didn't look like I'd be able to escape, even if I tried, so I might as well study a bit.

Ah, I wanna eat squid ink pasta...

* * *

[Léonard Chartres]

I had been chosen to become a part of the Crusaders while studying in a seminary. Of course, as someone who had spent my entire life from childhood until now guided by the Holy Bible, I considered the existence of the dungeons to be a dreadful threat. It reminded me of the Book of Revelation. I fully shared

the opinion of His Holiness the Pope. Clergymen needed to rise to the occasion to prevent the end of the world.

However, I had never fought. *Will I be able to take up arms and fight?* When we were brought into the dungeon, I couldn't help but worry. To be honest, I was relieved when we were told to learn Japanese first.

That man, Kazuhiko Ezo, had given off the impression of an intellectual at first. However, he did not seem to mind using violence to achieve his goals, considering how he had grabbed Chloe's throat. If we opposed him, we might really lose our lives, so for now, focusing on mastering Japanese was for the best. It was also needed to protect the honor of the Catholic Church and of the Chivalric Orders, to which my father belonged...

* * *

[Ishihara Yukie]

When Ezo gave his suggestion, all the other officials seemed to wonder if there was a need to go this far. After all, forcing them to stay in the dungeon to learn Japanese and get used to living inside a dungeon was quite a bold move. It was true that the food accessible in dungeons was quite limited. There was no way to drink beer or wine nor to enjoy pizza or sausages the same way you could in the wonderful world above ground. We had made preparations just in case, but the second I saw them, I knew we'd end up going with Ezo's plan.

"So, what should we do now?" I asked.

"Once they learn some Japanese, we'll have to go through the Boot Camp. I'll get them to Rank E at the very least. Fighting monsters can only come after that. The real issue is what you consider a full-fledged adventurer..." he said, trailing off.

"I want you to train them enough to be able to clear a low-rank dungeon if they cooperate. This is an official request. Simply put, I want them to be able to clear a dungeon of the same level as Sapporo Dungeon on their own."

"Then they need to reach Rank C. Teaching them fighting strategies and teamwork will take time though. There is no way to accomplish this quickly."

"In three months, the Dungeon System's full activation will be upon us. I want

you to finish training them before then. You can do that, right?” I asked.

“I’ll do what I can. Either way, I’ll be taking the Dungeon Busters’s employees on a trip to Okinawa for the next four days. I’ll leave the language instruction to the JSDF.”

I twitched a little upon hearing him speak about Okinawa. Here we were, drowning in work as we readied for the new business year. I couldn’t believe this man. Was he telling me this on purpose?

“Didn’t you think they might come prepared, having already learned Japanese?”

“I thought that probability was fairly close to zero. At their age, it’s only natural that they’d get overly excited about getting chosen to become Crusaders and forget the rest,” Ezoe said, before immediately disappearing, most likely on his way to Okinawa.

In Okinawa, March meant the opening of the beach season. They probably could go snorkeling. On the other hand, I had to work overtime today. For a moment, I wondered if I should have become an adventurer, too, before laughing and shaking my head.

* * *

[Vatican State — Curia]

The Roman Curia had many prerogatives on top of acting as the equivalent of a State Department and overseeing the different administrative institutions of the Vatican. It handled matters of justice and gave counsel based on the decisions from meetings between the cardinals. This year, a new dicastery had been established by Pope Francesco. The Dicastery for Reconquista of Dungeon Crusaders, which roughly meant that it was the dicastery in charge of overseeing dungeon clearing by the Crusaders, had been named to show the unwavering resolve of the Pope. As such, it used strong and evocative words, such as Reconquista and Dungeon Crusaders.

The DRDC, for short, was led by the only Japanese man to serve as a cardinal, Sakaguchi Stefano Hiroshi. He had studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University before being appointed as the archbishop of Tokyo but had finally been called

back to the Vatican, deemed fit for the position thanks to his excellent command of both Italian and English.

“They should have arrived in Japan by now.”

In Rome, it was around 1 p.m., just the time to take a siesta. However, Sakaguchi was sitting in his office with his subordinates, enjoying a nice cup of espresso.

“However, Prefect, did we truly make the right choice? For instance, the young Bezzini is quite the modern, secular young woman. Surely there were more devoted young people we could have chosen...”

“Of course, devotion to our Lord is of the utmost importance, but as His Holiness has said, the Reconquista of the dungeons will not be made any easier by their faith. Rather, we need strong individuals. Prayers shall not make the monsters they ought to fight disappear.”

Sakaguchi had been the one to make the final decision concerning the members of the Crusaders. He had first given three requirements to the Chivalric Orders.

1. The candidates must be children of Chivalric Order members.
2. The candidates must have been baptized.
3. The candidates must be physically and mentally able to withstand stressful situations.

Nowadays, the Three Great Chivalric Orders were more or less social clubs for the elite. Expecting the same piety from them as that of the Crusaders of old, who had devoted their hearts to the Church, was foolish. As for their children, they surely spent more time playing with their cellphones than listening to the priest’s sermon when at church, although most of them had indeed been baptized.

Some youths devoted themselves to the holy teachings, of course, but not all of them were Catholics. In Europe, many were Protestant, like the British, or Orthodox, like the Russians. For this reason, it was decided that the Crusaders should prioritize people who could show some flexibility in the face of other beliefs over overly devout Christians.

“I was born and raised in Japan,” said Sakaguchi. “We are quite flexible regarding all beliefs there. Shinto has a myriad of gods and, like Hinduism and early Judaism, is one of the world’s most important ethnic religions. It’s also very tolerant of other faiths. I believe the Dungeon Crusaders will be welcomed all across the world, regardless of culture or religion. For this reason, the members of the Crusaders themselves also need to welcome others.”

Cardinal Sakaguchi continued.

“It is true that we are no longer in an age in which we should send out missionaries. Nowadays, communication between individuals all over the world is simple, and information can be freely exchanged. The simple act of bearing the flag when they enter and clear dungeons will be quite enough to show the contribution of our Catholic Church to the world.”

The Curia had a branch known as the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, which had been instituted by Pope Gregory XV. Simply put, its job was to send missionaries to “barbaric” lands and “civilize” them to spread the Church’s sphere of influence. It was pretty much the marketing department of the Catholic Church. Rather than preach with the “push” approach (the door-to-door salesman method), however, they used a “pull” approach (akin to that of the modern salaryman) that consisted of giving the client the information they needed in a pleasant way. As such, the Crusaders were also meant to act as walking billboards to promote the Church. For this reason, the Vatican did not hesitate to spend huge sums on their activities.

“In any case, we have not chosen the Crusaders blindly. I believe Ezoe-san of Dungeon Busters will also come to realize this in time.”

Cardinal Sakaguchi laughed quietly before sipping his espresso.



[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After having had a good time with my employees in Ishigaki-jima for four days and three nights, I headed back to Tokyo and immediately dived into Yokohama Dungeon. I wanted to check the progress of the six Crusaders.

“We’ve mastered Japanese. We would like to start our training as

adventurers.”

“Hmm?” I looked up at Rolf Schnabel’s large frame before answering, slightly impressed.

I thought that the four who were learning Japanese for the first time would only have managed to speak some broken Japanese at the very best, but it seemed I had been mistaken. They were much more proficient than I’d expected. This was good. *We shouldn’t have any issues now.*

“We’re finally starting, right? I can’t wait to cast magic spells!” Chloe said, waving her pink, plastic wand around.

Even the dungeon itself didn’t recognize this thing as a weapon, huh? If she tried to fight with it, it would surely fall into pieces at the first impact.

The other four were also fully ready. However, I wasn’t mean enough to suddenly start the boot camp on the spot. They deserved a little break since they’d learned Japanese so fast.

“We’ll start the boot camp in two days,” I said. “It’s already the afternoon, so I’ll give you tomorrow off. Some of you are in Japan for the first time, right? Enjoy Tokyo.”

The six of them rejoiced, and I realized that the Vatican probably hadn’t chosen them for their piety but rather because of their personal experience. Coming from a religious institution, this was a surprisingly flexible decision. Their superior was quite good at managing human resources.

<I see you pretended to give them a day off to sightsee. That’s a good excuse. Tomorrow is March 6, the day of the next wave of dungeon emergencies. I’ll have some SPs follow them around, just to be safe.>

I was on a video call with Director General Ishihara just outside of Yokohama Dungeon. Although it was true I wanted to let them rest a little, the real reason I had delayed the start of the Crusaders’ training was more because I wanted to be available and prepared on the day of the dungeon emergencies. I expected some dungeons to appear in western Japan.

<While you were having fun in Okinawa, Japan and the rest of the world kept working. Here. There are plans to present dungeon-related laws to the House of

Representatives by June. As you hoped, it seems like high schoolers aged sixteen or older will be allowed to enter dungeons as well, as long they are accompanied by an adventurer of at least Rank D. In addition, busters, or the buster's organization, will receive ten percent of revenue from the sale of magic stones gathered from the dungeons they have cleared for the next twenty years. Naturally, this amount will be subject to taxes.>

It looked like the Anti-Dungeon Measures Committee had incorporated a fair number of my suggestions into the bill. I didn't really care about my or the other busters' profit, but, as I'd hoped, a long-lasting system was finally to be put in place. Nonetheless, it seemed the discussion would still go on for a long time. Many fields needed to be amended, such as the civil code and the penal code, after all.

"What about the investigation of Sapporo Dungeon?"

<They're not having much success with the analysis of the Dungeon Core. Diamond drill bits can't damage it at all, and X-rays don't go through either. Scientists have declared that our current scientific techniques aren't enough to analyze it. However, they have figured out something interesting about the red magic crystal materializable resource.>

A picture of red magic crystals appeared on the screen. Aside from black crystals, you could pick red, blue, yellow, and white crystals from the list of resources a dungeon could produce, so they had decided to switch the settings to red to see what would happen.

<In the end, these red magic crystals also produce a natural resource. It's actually a mix of hydrocarbon, sulfur, oxygen, nitrogen, and several other components. The mix itself has the same composition as the most-used oil in Japan...>

"Petroleum?" I asked.

Ishihara nodded.

<The research team tried to mix it with domestic wastewater and managed to turn it into crude oil, thanks to the addition of organic matter in that water. Apparently, they can now produce ten liters of crude oil using one gram of red magic crystals and a thousand square meters of wastewater in a process that

takes around two hours.>

“I can’t tell if that’s amazing news or not.”

<You can’t? Then, to give you an estimate, one barrel of crude oil sells for fifty-eight dollars nowadays. Ten liters is more or less 387 yen. If we were to buy red magic stones for a hundred yen per gram, we’d be able to cut our oil spending in half, even when taking the additional costs needed to build new treatment facilities into account.>

“Then I suppose the oil market will suddenly crash. Middle Eastern countries won’t stay quiet.”

<I’m telling you this just in case, but since you have insider info, you can’t just sell stocks, all right? You’ll be arrested. Anyway, the research team is now urging me to let them try the other crystals as well. They think magic stones may make both nuclear fusion and fission easily achievable as well. It’ll be a dream come true if magic crystals can be used to facilitate the fusion of hydrocarbon gases or handle nuclear wastes.>

“If they want to experiment, the best place is still Sapporo Dungeon, as we’ll be using Yokohama Dungeon for the Crusaders’ boot camp. We’ll need to let the rest of the world know about our research eventually, but there’s no reason to make too much noise for now.”

If we wanted to build new treatment facilities fueled by magic stones, we’d need new technologies. If Japan managed to develop them on its own and patent them before anyone else, our economy would surely bloom as a result. Ishihara was also thinking the same thing.

<Dungeons turn into pure gold once they’re cleared. When the whole world learns of this, everyone will be desperate to clear the dungeons as fast as possible. After the Monster Stampede has been prevented, the number of adventurers will be so great that they’ll have even more power than entire nations.>

“Don’t count your chickens before they’ve hatched. Our first priority is to prevent the Monster Stampede. The day after tomorrow, I’ll start training the Crusaders. Please try to keep the media off our backs for now.”

After finishing my report to Ishihara, I went back to my place in Mizue before heading to the construction site of Dungeon Busters' headquarters in Shishibone. The building was almost complete. I needed to start buying furniture and equipment soon.

I planned to have Kinouchi Mari's mother, Shiori, support us and handle the domestic matters. Tomorrow was a Friday and the day of the graduation ceremony at Mari's high school. I had a meeting with Kinouchi Shiori after it.

"Three months to go until the full activation..." I whispered, looking up at the workers finishing up the build in the pleasant, early spring weather.

New dungeons emerged around the world the following day, as expected. Thanks to satellites, we were able to find the dungeon that had appeared in Japan extremely quickly. A new dungeon had appeared within the grounds of the Shoujun-ji in Kamiya City, Hiroshima Prefecture.

* * *

[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Boot camps were usually held on Saturdays in Yokohama Dungeon, but today, the place was fully reserved for the Crusaders' training. While Akira had gone to Hiroshima to check out the new dungeon along with Shifu Liu, Rinko, Masayoshi, and Amane, Hisato had stayed to help me with the Crusaders' exclusive boot camp. Unlike the other three, who had experience teaching or being part of the workforce, Hisato had just graduated from high school and didn't have much life experience yet. I wanted him to learn how to lead people, so I had decided to have him assist me today.

"Kazu-san, you know I'm only nineteen, don't you? Aren't I even younger than the members of the Crusaders?"

"Don't let that bother you. In most workplaces, it's completely normal to have subordinates who are older than you are. To be fair, nineteen-year-olds and twenty-three-year-olds are pretty much the same in my eyes. You're all youngsters at any rate. You'll need to lead your own team soon enough, Hisato. Pay attention to the way I teach them."

We entered the room where the Crusaders were waiting. They were all fully

equipped, courtesy of the JSDF.

“Excuse me, I have a question,” Marco Montale said, raising his hand as soon as we came in. “Actually, I’d much rather wear chain mail with my Chivalric Order’s symbol than these clothes. I’m a Knight Templar, after all.”

The rest didn’t speak up, but they nodded in agreement with Marco. They still didn’t quite understand their place, did they? They were in dire need of some discipline.

“Do you think the lot of you are currently qualified to bear the flags of the Chivalric Orders? You haven’t even slain one monster yet, but if you’re gonna go ahead and boast like this...”

I approached Hisato and put my hand on his shoulder.

“This is Shinohara Hisato. He’s nineteen, pretty much the same age as you. You can fight him one-on-one. If you manage to win, I’ll let you bear the mark of your respective Chivalric Orders immediately. You’re free to use any weapon you’d like, all right?”

“Seriously? We just need to beat this guy, and we’re good? Do you even know who I am? I may not look it, but I’m pretty strong, you know!” Marco exclaimed.

“He’s right,” said Alberta “I don’t intend to belittle a member of Dungeon Busters, but I’ve been learning swordsmanship and martial arts since I was a child. As far as Japanese martial arts are concerned, I am only at the first dan level in kendo, but I pride myself on being much stronger than that. Even if he’s a man, he’s younger than I and unarmed. I can’t attack him.”

Even Alberta Reigenbach seemed to share Marco’s opinion. I had read their profiles, and I knew they all had some sort of sport-related experience, but this didn’t mean anything in the dungeons. First of all, I needed them to understand this.

“If you can win against Hisato, it means you’re pretty much ready to go clear dungeons on your own. Well, let’s go to Floor 1 and see what you can do.”

Without further ado, we all headed down to Floor 1 of Yokohama Dungeon.

* * *

[Yokohama Dungeon — Shinohara Hisato]

When Kazu-san started speaking, I panicked a little. I had fought my fair share of monsters, but I had never fought another person before. At first, I thought I needed to do my best and fight them seriously. However, Kazu-san immediately reprimanded me.

“Hisato, relax! If you keep this up, you’ll end up killing your opponent. Even if you took all of them on at the same time, you could still slaughter them in less than thirty seconds, considering your current skills. That’s how big the gap between you and them is.”

Well... Up until now, the only people I had trained with were Kazu-san, Akira-san, and the other three members of Dungeon Busters who were the same level as I, so naturally, I didn’t think of myself as strong. That being said, I still listened to Kazu-san’s instructions and put my guard up. The first one to challenge me was Marco-san, the Italian man. I heard he had been on the verge of debuting as a pro soccer player but had been forced to retire due to women-related scandals. Nowadays, he didn’t seem to do much other than laze around.

“I’m coming!”

Marco-san approached, hopping casually before suddenly lunging to hit me. He dashed in the manner of a professional soccer player. In an instant, he was right in front of... No, wait. Actually, he still wasn’t... *He’s super slow?* If it had been Akira, he would have been right in front of me in a heartbeat, even if he had started much farther away. *Oh, whatever. I’ll give him a little flick for now. Surely, it’ll be all right.*

“Aaaargh!!!”

I lightly flicked the forehead of the man slowly approaching me, but he was unexpectedly blown back before fainting, clearly in agony. *Ah. I get it now. Kazu-san told them to fight me so that they could understand this firsthand.*

“We don’t know what rank you are, but at the very best, it’ll be Rank E,” Kazu-san explained. “On the other hand, Hisato has surpassed the limits of the human body. He’s Rank C. The difference between you and him is as big as that between an elephant and an ant. If you’re not careful, one of you may die for real. Anyway, who’s next?”

The others shook their heads. I might have scared them off. Only one of them stared at me with a stern expression before walking up to me, a cylinder-shaped bag in hand. It was Alberta-san, the woman who wore a harsh expression.

“It seems like we’re the ones who gravely underestimated you. However, that is even more reason for me to fight. I shall not bow down to adversity. You said we were free to use weapons, right? I’ll take you up on that offer,” Alberta-san said, taking a katana from the bag as she spoke.

Wait, wait! I thought weapons couldn’t be brought into the dungeons! Maybe it’s okay because we’re still in the safety zone?

“Let’s exchange a single blow. I’ll come at you with everything I have!” Alberta exclaimed.

She sheathed her sword, letting it hang from her belt, and moved one leg forward. Her right hand came to rest on the hilt of her sword. I had seen that in manga before! It was an iai pose. *How should I put this...?* Even though she was blonde, she reminded me of a Yamato Nadeshiko—one of the beautiful, idealized, traditional Japanese women—combined with the swordsmen who appeared in anime.

“Kazu-san, what should I do?” I asked.

“She’s piqued my curiosity. Just face her head-on. Don’t worry. Even if she cuts you, you won’t die.”

I let out a strained laugh. Well, Kazu-san wasn’t wrong. Even if she cut me, I wouldn’t die. We even had Extra Potions for extreme cases.

I had learned how to fight an armed opponent. First, I had to visualize the maximum space Alberta could reach without moving, and a katana had a pretty big range. I couldn’t very well kill her, so I had to go easy on her while still dealing with her weapon effectively. On top of everything else, she was a woman. If possible, I didn’t want to hurt her at all.

Alberta huffed quietly.

I was a member of Dungeon Busters. I couldn’t afford to lose or to get hurt. *I’m sorry, but I’ll have to get serious, all right?*

I stepped forward, immediately closing in on her. I kicked the floor and forced my way into Alberta-san's range in an instant.

"Sorry!"



Her arms and hips moved, and her sword sliced at me from the side. However, that was well within my expectations. I twisted my body mid-move, rotating clockwise to evade the blade before grabbing Alberta-san's right hand—which tightly gripped the hilt of her katana—with my left.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye, and Alberta-san was visibly dumbfounded that she had been immobilized so quickly. As soon as I released her hand, she hurriedly moved back.

“Damn...”

Nooo, if you suddenly speak up, I wanna hear the rest! I grew up reading light novels. I can't help but expect you to deliver some sort of big line! However, Alberta-san didn't say anything more and quietly returned her katana to its scabbard.

“It's my loss. As expected of a member of Dungeon Busters, you're really strong,” she finally added.

“Ah, hmm... Sure.”

Truth be told, I was the weakest. Rinko-san was an assistant instructor of an ancient martial art, Masayoshi-san used to be a sumo wrestler, and as far as Amane-san was concerned... Well, considering her personality, I had no hope of ever beating her. Shifu Liu had taught me how to use my sword somewhat efficiently, but I was still a complete beginner at magic. My goal was to eventually become a mystical swordsman, but I wasn't there yet.

“So. Let's get your training started. The objective is to make you as strong as, and if possible stronger than, Hisato. It'll be all right. I'll make sure you get to that level.”

Kazu-san was smiling, but I knew that from now on, they were going to be subjected to his training until they were one step away from losing their minds...

* * *

[Chloe Fontaine]

“U... U... Ultra-hard warrior Gaoringa!”

I was currently playing shiritori—a Japanese game in which you needed to say a word starting with the last sound of the previous player’s word—with the rest of the Crusaders. It was a good way to kill time while also working on our Japanese. After all, this was so boring!

We had to wear a ten kilogram weighted vest and follow Kazu and Hisato around as they killed rabbit monsters. At first, I thought the rabbits were super cute, but after Kazu poked one, its face suddenly changed into that of a hannya demon and lunged at us. *So that’s what monsters are like...*

“Herr Ezoe, we would also like to fight,” the overly serious Rolf said.

Reichmen sure were diligent. Didn’t they want to enjoy things some more? There were so many fun things! Fashion, food, anime, love...

“Haste makes waste,” Kazu said. “First, you need to build muscles. I’ll keep increasing the weight of the vest too. I’ll have you fight the evil rabbits when you’re wearing fifty kilogram vests. Whether you’re a fighter or a magician, the very first step is to build stamina. And, by the way, Chloe, using proper nouns when you play shiritori is cheating, you know?”

Hmpf! What’s wrong with it? Any Japanese person should know Gaoringa anyway! Ah! It’s my turn again?

“Li... Li... Lyrica Moe-tan!”

“You finished with an ‘n.’ You lose, Chloe.”

Alberta was laughing at me! *Grrrr!*

* * *

[Franca Bezzini]

Everyone was chatting loudly. However, I didn’t take part in their banter. To be honest, I couldn’t bring myself to care about dungeons or the Stampede. My life had already ended in high school.

“Franca! We’re doing a Japanese food quiz now!”

“Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

I bluntly turned down Chloe’s offer. It couldn’t be helped. After all, I was

nothing more than a defective product. Back in high school, I had ruptured my Achilles tendon and had been forced to give up my dream of becoming a track-and-field athlete. From then on, I couldn't find any excitement in life, no matter what I did. Part of the reason I had accepted the invitation to join the Crusaders was that, in a way, I wouldn't mind getting killed off by some monster while in a dungeon.

I did not care about the Vatican or the Catholic Church in any way, shape, or form. If God existed, he could start by giving me my leg back.

At the very start, Ezoe had told us, "I want all of you to think about something. If you intend to become busters, you need to find an objective beyond personal gains. Whether you do it for your god, your family, your lover... Anything's okay. But you need to fight for something or someone. Become stronger for them. If you don't have that mentality, everything will crumble around you soon enough."

That disqualified me from the get-go. I couldn't even get motivated for myself, let alone for others. If I had to say why I had entered the dungeon, my main reason was that I had free time and nothing better to do.

"In case you're curious, Hisato's goal is to gather Extra Potions. They can cure any disease and even restore missing limbs. Hisato plans on gathering as many of these as he can and traveling around the world to heal terminally ill patients. There's no need to rush. You can think about your own goals."

"What...did you say?" I asked.

It could restore missing body parts? Then couldn't it heal my leg? Although I could still walk, I was told I would never be able to run properly ever again. With this, maybe I could.

Extra Potions...

I felt as though some flame had been rekindled inside me.



[Hiroshima Dungeon — Shishido Akira]

We were currently headed to the new dungeon that had appeared in Kamiya

City, Hiroshima Prefecture. Hiroshima was the biggest city in the Chugoku region and had a population of over one million. Dungeons seemed to materialize mainly in regions that had high population density, so most big cities were constantly nervous about one appearing.

“Ah, it’s my first time in Hiroshima, but it’s a nice place. I’ve even had offal tempura for the first time.”

I’d thought Hiroshima’s specialties were okonomiyaki and oysters, but according to Amane-chan, who came from Hiroshima, those were only recommended to tourists. The locals enjoyed other dishes.

She took us to a restaurant called Akko-chan in Nishi-ku, and I was quite surprised. After all, the counter seats had access to a cutting board and knives! They didn’t seem to give much regard to security here. They served omasum, tripe, and other innards as tempura, but as the pieces were usually too big to eat, they left knives and cutting boards in front of the customers so that we could easily cut up our food.

I held tongs with my left hand and cut the tempura into small pieces. We were advised to eat them with a mixture of togarashi, soy sauce, and vinegar. It was extremely tasty! We finished the meal with some denkaku udon, made with innard-based dashi. It was my first time having this kind of dashi, which was really good as well.

If I had been with Aniki, we probably would have gone to play in Nagarekawa, the red-light district of Hiroshima, but I was with Rinko-chan and Amane-chan this time, which made this a bit difficult. Masayoshi didn’t seem to be all that interested in such places either.

We took a taxi from Nishi-ku and went east, following Peace Boulevard. We were headed to another restaurant in Yayoi City to taste a dish that the local gourmet loved: sea urchin cresson.

“During the Autumn Tournaments, I used to eat chanko nabe. They make stuff as good as that here too!” Masayoshi said.

“The thing that surprised me the most upon joining Dungeon Busters was the luxurious meals we always get to eat. When we hold joint practice with our school’s alumni during the summer, we have a feast on the last evening, but the

food is never as lavish as this,” Rinko-chan added.

Rinko-chan and Masayoshi were both eating their fill. Aniki had told us never to be frugal with the food, so they could just order as much food as they liked. It wouldn’t be an issue.

“When people mention Hiroshima’s specialties, what usually comes up are Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki, Japanese persimmons, and onomichi ramen, but you can eat those in Tokyo as well. Recently, tantan men without broth, Kure’s kaigun curry, and Miyajima’s broiled conger eel on rice have also gotten quite famous. Besides those, Kure’s chilled noodle dish, reimen, and pickled vegetable yakisoba, Fukuyama’s use of nebuto fish in their cooking, Bingo’s fuchuyaki, and Shoubara’s issun soba are also really good. If you want to taste all the renowned dishes of the region, one or two days aren’t enough,” Amane-chan explained, looking extremely proud.

I kinda hoped dungeons would appear in every prefecture now. We’d get to taste gourmet dishes all over the country... *Well, it’s a bit inappropriate, so I won’t actually say this out loud.*

* * *

“A mouse?”

No matter how I looked at them, the monsters that came out on Floor 1 of Hiroshima Dungeon seemed like normal mice. However, there were *tons* of them. Dozens of mice approached, forming a huge swarm.

“Ho ho ho!” Shifu Liu stroked his beard, speaking happily. “A bunch of small monsters are swarming together and closing in on us. Even if each mouse is weak, so many grouped together is indeed dangerous. So, what should we do?”

“Looks like I’m in luck. I needed a target...”

Amane stepped forward and took out her whips. *Wait. She has two now?*

“I rolled the gacha and got another one. I wanted to try dual-wielding.”

She crossed her arms and brought them down. Both whips curved elegantly before slamming down on the floor. The mice that had been approaching flew back upon being lashed.

“Eeeek...”

The mice squeaked pitifully and disappeared, turning into smoke midair. Amane-chan made her whip cut the wind over and over, bringing them down mercilessly on the monsters. With each blow, pitiful squeaks filled the air. The mice stopped approaching, looking frightened.

“Huh... This is giving me goosebumps. I’m starting to feel bad for the mice...” I said.

“Ho ho... Dual-wielding helps you cover a much wider range. If you need to face a swarm of weak enemies, this may indeed be the best solution,” Shifu Liu commented.

The enemies on Floor 1 were Rank F. The dungeon might be Rank C, then. We tried weighing the magic stones the mice dropped, which were about three grams each. If you considered the speed at which the mice appeared, this dungeon might be the best one to earn money in yet. We checked out the cards as well. These monsters were apparently called poison rats and while they were only Rank F, it seemed they could produce poison. *After mining for magic stones for a while, should we check out Floor 2?*

On Floor 2, we came face-to-face with big rodents that looked like nutrias. These fifty-something-centimeters large brown mice swarmed and came crawling towards us all at once. Amane-chan brought her whips down on them, and they were blown back, turning into smoke in the exact same way as the mice on Floor 1.

“Amane-san, please let me fight next.”

Whirling her staff in a circular motion, Rinko-chan stepped forward. She bent her knees, readying her staff before thrusting at an incredible speed. The nutrias faces were smashed, and they turned into smoke one after the other.

“Let me have a go too!”

Masayoshi took a stance similar to that of a sumo wrestler before his initial charge, his shield attached to his left arm.

“Dosukoi!”

Keeping his stance low, Masayoshi readied his shield before charging into the swarm of monsters. The nutrias were thrown back one after the other. As expected, the initial charge of a sumo wrestler was no joke.

I once heard that the charge of a yokozuna had a destructive force of over two tons, and Masayoshi was surely even stronger than that currently. The great yokozuna, Chiyoda no Fuji-zeki, was 183 centimeters tall and weighed 126 kilograms with around ten percent body fat. As for Masayoshi, he was 193 centimeters tall, weighed 98 kilograms, and had only five percent body fat. He seemed to want to get heavier these days and was eating more and more, but it wasn't that easy.

“Rank E monsters and five-gram magic stones... This is pretty much the same as Yokohama Dungeon. We'll know for sure once we reach Floor 3.”

We advanced towards Floor 3 while kicking the nutrias that came at us, realizing all over again that the dungeons were not to be underestimated.

“This is a Rank C monster! A horn rat! Masayoshi, ready your shield!” Shifu Liu warned.

A huge rat that looked more like a wild boar with a horn poking from its head charged at us at full speed. Yosshii hit it with his shield and managed to make it fly away, but it wasn't alone. After the first one was thrown back, ten more showed up, all lunging at the same time. Amane brought down her whip. It connected with a loud sound but did nothing to slow down their advance.

“Wait... Rank C monsters showing up so suddenly is cheating!”

I went around Masayoshi, kicking the wall and counterattacking, stopping the rodents in their tracks. One blow with my thrusting technique was enough to make one of these monsters disappear, but having to fight ten Rank C monsters at the same time sure was harsh.

“We're retreating! This seems to be a Rank B dungeon.”

We covered each others' backs as we retreated, killing off the mice that jumped at us one by one.

We were lucky to be on a straight path. If these monsters had been able to attack us from every direction, it might have been really dangerous, even for

me.



[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“So Hiroshima Dungeon is Rank B...”

<I think it’s a pretty good place to mine up until Floor 2. However, Floor 3 is a bit dangerous. If Rank D adventurers try to go in alone, they’ll probably die.>

As I listened to Akira’s report, I tried to establish a mental order of priority for clearing dungeons. I wanted to clear at least two more dungeons in March. The best option was probably sticking to my initial plan and focusing on clearing Kanazawa and Funabashi Dungeons first.

<Aniki, Amane-chan and the others want to stay and mine for a bit. Is that okay?>

“Sure. I’ll be busy for another few days with the Crusaders’ training anyway. Go earn as much money as you like in the meantime.”

Akira smiled, turning his head to say, “He said it’s okay!” before cutting the call. They seemed to want to have fun in Hiroshima for a little longer.

Summing up what Akira had told me and turning that in to the Dungeon Adventurer HQ was my job. After all, I couldn’t make Akira write reports. I quickly summarized everything I knew about the dungeon up until Floor 3 and added in the pictures my members had sent me. Now it looked like a proper report. I had already made a template for dungeon rank reports, so it didn’t take too long to finish. I could probably send it off before the workday was over.

<You work fast, as usual! I tasked you with checking the dungeon only two days ago. I didn’t expect to receive the report today...>

While Director General Ishihara, with whom I was having a video call, praised me, I realized the days we could casually chat like this were numbered. Once the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau became a ministry of its own, I wouldn’t get many chances to talk to her directly. I more or less finished reporting what I knew and told Ishihara I would report to her section chief in the future. She smiled sadly.

<I don't mind accompanying you for a drink from time to time, you know? To be honest, I think it would be good if we did go out sometimes. Especially for you...>

“What do you mean?”

<You have comrades—Shishido Akira, Tanaka Mutsuo, Kusakabe Rinko... But all of them are members of Dungeon Busters. That means you'll always stand above them. To withstand such a lonely position, I think you also need someone on equal footing with whom you can discuss your worries. No matter how strong you get or what rank you become, humans have their limits. I'm worried about you. I'm scared you'll end up burning out...>

Ishihara wore a very unusual expression. She looked truly worried about me. For the past nine months, I had kept on moving forward. I had gathered allies and started clearing dungeons. However, I needed to keep pushing forward for the next ten years, and I needed to hasten my pace. I did feel my fatigue catching up to me a little when I thought about it like this.

“You're right,” I admitted. “When I need some cheering up, I'll call you.”

<You're welcome to do so at any time. See you later, then.>

The screen went black, and I inhaled deeply. I didn't feel burnt out because of stress. However, mental stress usually settled in unnoticed. I did try to give myself breaks from time to time, but perhaps I truly needed to forget about the dungeons and the busters and enjoy myself a little.

“Maybe I'll go on a little trip to Hakone by myself, then,” I said after a pause.

Before that, I needed to finish training the Crusaders. It should be about time for them to come out of the dungeon for a shower. I'd left things to Hisato for a while, and I was looking forward to seeing their progress.

* * *

<The six members of the Crusaders just came out from the dungeon. They seem to be in good health. Currently, Shinohara Hisato-san, a very young recruit of Dungeon Busters at only nineteen years old, is in charge of their training. Ezoe Kazuhiko-san, the representative of Dungeon Busters, has stated that he will not train them personally until they reach Rank D. Shinohara-san should

thus act as their trainer for a while longer.>

TV crews, not only from Japan but from overseas as well, had come to cover the events. I had left the role of trainer to Hisato, so I didn't intend to speak to the journalists. Whenever they asked me something, I directed them back to Hisato.

<Hmm... So... If we take the time inside the dungeon into account, I have now spent around forty days with the Crusaders. They have all reached Rank E and should get to Rank D soon. Regarding the skills, they got...I mean...have obtained... I don't think I should be the one announcing that... However, I can say that during our time together we have developed close relationships. We may not belong to the same organization, but we share the same aim of clearing the dungeons. I believe we will be able to keep on working together in the future as well.>

Hisato fumbled his words as he explained the situation as well as he could on TV. I looked over the files Hisato had sent me while listening to his interview and checked out the status of the Crusaders.

Name:	Rolf Schnabel
Title:	None
Rank:	E
Possession Limit:	0/29
Skills:	Card Slot, Shield Bash (Lvl. 1), _____

Name:	Alberta Reigenbach
Title:	None
Rank:	E
Possession Limit:	0/28
Skills:	Card Slot, Sword Mastery (Lvl. 1), _____

Name:	Léonard Chartres
Title:	None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0/22

Skills: Card Slot, Holy Magic (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Chloe Fontaine

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0/25

Skills: Card Slot, Esoteric Magic (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Franca Bezzini

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0/26

Skills: Card Slot, Reconnaissance (Lvl. 1), _____

Name: Marco Montale

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 0/28

Skills: Card Slot, Unarmed Mastery (Lvl. 1), _____

“That’s quite the surprise. They all obtained skills, and on top of that, Holy Magic, Esoteric Magic, and even Reconnaissance appeared?! Their team will be quite balanced, considering they all got different abilities. I wonder if the person who picked them expected this?”

The Vatican State had an organization called DRDC which was apparently headed by a Japanese cardinal. It had already been publicly announced that the skills people obtained were likely influenced by their backgrounds. He seemed to have picked the members of the Crusaders after looking into their personal

histories and personalities, making choices based on the potential he could see in them, rather than on how religious they were, while still making sure that believers would be approved of them.

“Well, we can’t expect anything less from an organization that has managed to rule over the Catholic world for 1,700 years, can we? Anyway, how is their morale?”

“Morale’s been pretty high since they got their skills! Chloe-san, for instance, is so motivated that she keeps pressing me to teach her magic as soon as possible. The one I’m most interested in is Franca-san though. As I told you in my report, she’s very interested in Extra Potions.”

Something suddenly clicked when Hisato said this. I took out my tablet and opened the files I had on the Crusaders. The Ministry of Defense had given me a Japanese version of their personal history, and as I reread Franca Bezzini’s file, I suddenly understood.

“Franca Bezzini was a promising track-and-field athlete until high school. She was even good enough to be considered as a candidate to represent Italie in the Olympics, despite the fact she was still a high schooler. Sadly, she was in a traffic accident while trying to rescue a cat and ruptured her left Achilles tendon. As you can guess, this ended her sports career on the spot. After that, she didn’t go to university, nor did she work. It seems like she just spent her time lazing around with no goal.”

“I...” Hisato spoke up after a while. “I currently have two Extra Potions. Do you think I should give her one?”

“What do *you* think? Put yourself into her shoes, and try picturing it. You start to believe that, if you work hard as an adventurer, you may be able to find an Extra Potion. Then, you’d be able to fully cure your leg. If you were starting to get some hope and someone suddenly gave you an Extra Potion just like that, what would you do?”

“I’d be happy. Thankful. And then...” Hisato trailed off. “I’d leave the Crusaders?”

“That’s likely, yeah. What I’m trying to say is that you should consider the bigger picture. What would be best for her in the long run? Sometimes, we try

to help people, and we think we're doing the right thing but end up causing more harm than good. Do you think an Italian girl who suddenly left an organization like the Crusaders would be able to return to the running track?"

Hisato nodded, a serious expression on his face. Simply curing her wasn't good enough. If we just fixed her leg and left her with no clear goal to figure things out herself, she'd keep wandering aimlessly like a lost kitten.

"I'll try to speak to Rolf-san and Marco-san to see what they think. Their personalities may seem totally opposed at first, but they're both very passionate people. I think they'll give me some good advice."

Thinking about what was best for someone when there was no clear answer... Once you reached adulthood, you would undoubtedly be confronted with situations like this one. You'd slowly become an adult by living through such situations over and over again, gaining experience.

I decided to let Hisato handle things and nodded.



[Funabashi City, MIKEA — Kinouchi Shiori]

I gave birth to Mari at seventeen, and to be able to raise her, I had to make do with a very small budget. I always cooked myself in order to spend as little as possible on food.

My ex-husband never hit me or Mari, but he cheated on me at every chance. I put up with it at first, thinking I had to be strong for Mari, but when my daughter graduated from primary school, I couldn't take it anymore. I divorced him and went back to my parents' home.

Mari had gone through a lot because of me... When she bought me cake with the money she received from her first part-time job, I shed tears. Somehow, a shallow woman such as myself had managed to raise such a good girl.

"Most of the busters are single. I'm sure they will yearn for a taste of home after spending days upon days in the dungeons. I would like you to make them homely food to enjoy, Kinouchi-san," Ezoe-san had told me.

Starting this month, I was to become an employee of Dungeon Busters. My

work would mainly consist of cooking and cleaning, but the salary was surprisingly high. I wanted to rise to Ezoe's expectations and provide the best possible meals.

"Mom, look! These plates are cute, right?"

Today, we had come to a furniture retailer situated in Funabashi City, MIKEA. Mari was holding a binder with sketches of the future staff cafeteria and running around in high spirits. I had been tasked with choosing not only the kitchen utensils and tableware but also the tables, chairs, and anything else needed to bring the cafeteria to life. When I had asked about the budget, I had been carelessly given ten million yen. I still remembered the way I had shuddered upon receiving such a sum.

"If you think of the typical cafeteria in light novels, it should be something along the lines of the 'pub next door where the guild hangs out,' right? To get that vibe going, I think we should pick wooden furniture..."

Ezoe-san walked alongside Mari, wearing a suit. I stared at the two of them, in spite of myself, fascinated. My good-for-nothing ex-husband still wore nothing but shorts and sandals even though he was over thirty. Nicely put, he had a youthful appearance... If you were to say it less nicely, he outright looked like some sort of frivolous delinquent. *This may actually be the first time I'm spending time with a man who's a true adult.*

"You have a wonderful husband," said the clerk.

"What? Hmm..." I immediately turned red. "Yes, I do."

She was right... From an outsider's perspective, we did indeed look like a family on a shopping trip.

"Mom, don't you think we should leave this to a pro coordinator? The scale of the cafeteria is so big. I'm having a hard time picturing it."

"Hmm... What's your opinion, Ezoe-san?" I asked him, blushing a little.

He looked at his watch and nodded.

"I thought you might say this, so I made an appointment with one of MIKEA's furniture consultants. Let's head to the second floor to discuss things with

them. This being said, I want to leave this in your hands, Kinouchi-san. I don't mind if you make a mistake. We can just buy different furniture then. Ten million is pocket change anyway..."

We made our way to the second floor, Mari standing between the two of us. We truly...looked like a married couple.



[Akihabara, Sotokanda 1-*chome*, old office — Tanaka Mutsuo]

“The one-eighth-scale Akane-shi figurine is finally complete!”

Dungeon Busters was a company that allowed its employees to have a good work-life balance. I had plenty of free time after work and went to an old office I rented in Akihabara to immerse myself in model-making.

The Olympics would be held this year, so Super Comic Sale had been moved up to May. I still had a mountain of things to do before I was ready for the event. This year, I planned on displaying handmade figures of the LR character cards at my booth on top of showing off the cards I had obtained myself in the dungeons. Of course, I was also working on some manga volumes on the side.

“The salary we make working at Dungeon Busters is enough, so let’s stop our doujinshi circle.”

As if any of us would ever say something like that! If anything, *this* was our treasured life’s work. It was also good publicity for the Busters. We planned to get a booth at an expo in Nagoya next October. *I’m sure our stuff will be super popular!*

“Mucchii, regarding the picture of Emily-chan... Don’t you... You know... Have one from a lower angle? If possible, I’d also like to get my hands on pictures of the Crusaders.”

“Right, we definitely need some of those. After all, Chloe-chan is starting to become quite popular.”

“I’ll ask Ezoe-shi and Mari-shi,” I answered.

The sale of cards had been prohibited, but selling copies with the Dungeon Busters logo was perfectly okay. I had managed to make copies that both looked and felt pretty realistic, so I’d also need to prepare some of these. For now, the best cards we had were SR cards, but I was sure we’d manage to obtain Ultra Rare Cards before long. Then, people from all over the world would crowd our booth! *Aaah, I can’t wait!*



[Yokohama Dungeon — Rolf Schnabel]

“They’re coming! I’ll handle two of them. Alberta, Marco, Franca, take one each! Chloe, you’re in charge of using magic from the rear. Léo, you focus on buffing and healing us!”

Two weeks after finishing our Japanese language crash course, we were fighting the kangaroos on Floor 4 of Yokohama Dungeon. We had quickly reached Rank D but had now hit a plateau. To be precise, this felt completely different compared to our previous growth spike. It was as if two forces—one to make us change further and one to keep us in our current state—battled inside of us, pushing on the same door from either side. The two forces were at a complete stalemate, the door unmoving.

“To reach Rank C, you need to surpass human limits. If you keep resting and taking it easy, you’ll never be able to break through. You need to keep fighting. Do so over and over again until you’re on the verge of madness. That’s when the door that leads to the next level—superhuman strength—will open. Keep on fighting. Don’t think about anything else,” Herr Ezoe declared.

“Shifu Liu, please continue attracting monsters,” Herr Ezoe added “Don’t stop unless they die.”

What the hell? Even his brain had to be made of muscle to spurt out this kind of thing. I had somehow forgotten... I thought we and the Japanese had plenty of common values. After all, we were both reasonable, logical, meticulous, and serious people, but I had forgotten how impossible to decipher their way of thinking was. Although Japan was a small island, it had stood its ground against the rest of the world in all-out wars. I had truly forgotten that kamikaze spirit of theirs.

Regardless, the monsters kept coming at us, relentless and heartless. I let out a war cry. It wasn’t the time to lose myself in trivial thoughts. If we didn’t fight, we’d be the ones dying. Relying on such mental pick-me-ups wasn’t something we Reichmen did, but I, for one, roared.

“Don’t falter! We’re the Crusaders! We’re knights who act as God’s vanguard and shield the people! Now is the time to bear the Crusader’s flag!”

Herr Ezoe had brought out our flag while we weren’t paying him attention. Behind us was the Crusaders’ banner. Knowing this, I felt a wave of energy

rising from the pit of my stomach.

Chapter 2: Full Activation

[A certain country in South Gameraica]

A man went up the stairs of his apartment building in an extremely good mood. He had surpassed human limits, reached the bottom floor of a dungeon, and gained the ability to use his extraordinary powers outside of the dungeons.

Though he had once devoted himself to saving lives as a doctor, he had gradually changed while fighting in the dungeon. Now, he would not hesitate to kill to fulfill his objectives. Even so, he still retained some humanity as he fought in a world of madness. The man was suddenly made aware of this fact as he went home to his elderly mother.

In this ruined country, half of the capital had devolved into a slum, and the mafia reigned supreme. Politicians were corrupt. Everyone dabbled in corruption, from government officials to the police. The weak and destitute could do nothing but watch as they were stolen from.

With the apparition of dungeons, however, the world had undergone tremendous change. By using the strength gained in the dungeons, changing this twisted world was possible. *First, I will change the slums of this city.* The first step would be to destroy the crime syndicate that unilaterally preyed on the poor while colluding with the police then distribute the wealth they had hoarded back to the people. *Soon, the silent majority will notice this... The world is changing.*

“Mom, I’m home.”

Usually, his mother would have welcomed him. This time, however, she did not offer any answer for some reason. The man tilted his head and entered the flat.

Besides his mother, he had no family. She had worked day and night, saving money so he had been able to study abroad. In this country, plenty of people were sincere and filled to the brim with love and affection. His mother was one

such person. Although he wasn't wealthy by any means, the warmth of his home allowed him to remain himself.

Looking for his mother, he pushed the door to the living room.

"Doctor, you're home."

The man had let something slip from his mind for a moment: the world was a cruel place, and many were naturally evil. As soon as he stepped into the living room, he came face-to-face with a terrible sight—his mother, a gun to her temple, surrounded by several men.

"Mom!"

"Oh my. I advise you not to move. We know you can use some strange powers. It seems like you crushed many of our guys. I'm afraid you've gone a bit overboard. You've pissed off someone important."

"Someone important? Who are you?!"

A gun was suddenly pressed to the back of his head, and he dropped the bag he had been holding and raised his hands. The man, who was holding his mother hostage, wore a twisted smile.

"Thanks to you killing our boss off, we now have a golden opportunity to move up. Our boss had ties with people far more important than you imagined. If we hand you over to them, they might just grant us this whole city in exchange."

"Could it be... The president?"

"If you don't want me to shoot your mama, be good."

The gun pushed against his head. The men, fully confident in their victory, started laughing and mocking him. If he moved, he and his mother would easily be killed. Even if he did not resist, he'd still be killed.

The strong always preyed on the weak, no matter what. Stealing from them, tyrannizing them, killing them... This was how the world worked. If anything, hoping for something different was plain foolishness. If one didn't resist, one would only get exploited. Fighting was the only way out.

The man shivered but not out of fear. Or rather, it wasn't out of fear of these

men. What made him tremble was the choice he was now forced to make. Did he hold on to his humanity and let himself be killed? Or did he walk a path of carnage in his plight to change the world?

Finally, the man made his decision. He looked at his crying mother, showing her a face full of resolve.

“Mom... I won’t ask you to forgive me. I hereby throw away my humanity!”

The way he moved was not human in the least. He broke the neck of the man who had been pressing a gun to his head in one blow before immediately kicking the gun of the man who was standing next to the kitchen. Lunging at him, he used his hand as though it was a blade and cut open his stomach. Several gunshots were fired at him but he moved at an unbelievable speed, evading every single bullet before picking up a pen off a shelf and throwing it. The pen pierced the head of one of his foes, burying itself halfway through his skull.

“D-Don’t you care what happens to your mother?!” one of the gangsters yelled, pressing a gun to her head.

The man picked up a gun off the floor and laughed.

“You made three mistakes. First, you gave me too much time. You should have shot me the moment I walked into the room. Second, you told me who sent you. Now I know exactly who I ought to crush. And, finally, you severely underestimated my resolve.”

Bang!!!

The dry sound of a gunshot resounded through the room. His mother’s gaze swept the room before finally falling on her own body. A red stain was spreading across her chest, right over her heart.

The gangster discarded the man’s dying mother and took aim at the man himself. At the same time, the man threw himself at the gangster. Screaming, the gangster pulled the trigger. The man easily deflected the bullet with his bare hands, however, and grabbed the neck of his enemy in the same motion. He lifted the gangster with only one hand, madness swirling in his eyes as he smiled brightly. The gangster trembled in fear before his neck was broken as

easily as if a pencil had been snapped in half.

Throwing down the body of the nameless thug, the man went to pick up the body of his mother—whom he had just killed himself—and brought her to the bedroom. He lay down her lifeless body and sat in front of the mirror.

“Mom, I’ll succeed...”

Finally, he dipped his finger into his mother’s blood and brought it to his cheek. In the mirror, the face of a man wearing clown-like makeup could be seen. A single teardrop rolled down his cheek from his right eye.



[Motoakasaka — State Guest House]

While the Crusaders were undergoing their hellish training, the Japanese government was busy holding a summit that would greatly influence the fate of the whole country. The two parties involved were Zhou Haoran, the seventh president of Sina, and Urabe Seiichirou, the ninety-eighth prime minister of Japan. This summit had garnered a great deal of attention, even outside of the country. Since Gamera had announced at the beginning of the year that they intended to keep to their territory, Japan had been at the forefront of the international anti-dungeon endeavors, acting as a de facto leader.

On the other hand, one couldn’t exactly say the Far East was peaceful or united. Even before the dungeons appeared, the region was riddled with tensions that could escalate at any point. The Kingdom of Ko incessantly conducted missile tests. Gamera and Sina were engaged in a never-ending tariff war, while Japan-Woori relations were deteriorating.

As such, the Sina-Japan summit was the center of attention and many hoped that it would result in the birth of a consensus that would make history and stabilize the Far East. For this reason, the press room of the State Guest House was bustling with journalists from more than twenty different countries. It was finally time for the Sina-Japan summit to start.

“Mr. Prime Minister, I believe it has already come to your attention, but several dungeons have emerged in the Oriental Republic of Sina. Our army is directing its effort to clear them, but they have not had much success as of

now. We are currently facing growing unrest amongst our people due to the fear of the Monster Stampede. We would like to ask for Japan's help on the matter, as you have proven how effective your measures against dungeons are."

During summits between country leaders, the head-of-states would usually only discuss big cross-national policies and future trends and leave the details for their ministers to work out. However, things were to be handled a bit differently this time. Discussions had already been ongoing for more than two months behind closed doors, and the two leaders planned to discuss things rather in-depth.

"The dungeons are the common enemy of every human, President Zhou. Of course, we will not hesitate to cooperate with you. Many of our citizens are opposed to our cooperation, however, due to the ongoing tensions between our two countries regarding our individual understandings of history, territorial disputes, and the handling of intellectual property and copyright. As long as these frictions are unresolved, it will remain difficult for our government to offer a large-scale cooperative effort. What are your thoughts on this matter?"

The goals of the Sinese delegation, and the general content of the discussion, had been gone over and made clear prior to the summit. The general stance of the Japanese government—although they understood the situation, it was difficult to accept fully—had also been conveyed back to the Sinese. These talks were meant to let the Sinese reply to this announcement.

"As you know, Prime Minister Urabe, we have never regarded Japan as a hostile country, even in the early days of our regime. If you'll allow me to speak candidly, I would also like to add that we currently do not think of Japan as our enemy. We have changed our diplomatic stance several times since the Second World War, according to our shifting state policies. While this may have caused inconveniences for Japan, please understand that these policies were absolutely necessary for our country."

Urabe was astonished by Zhou's words but could only show a strained smile on the surface. After being told so clearly that their anti-Japanese moves were mere state policies or needed to uphold the one-party rule of the Communist Party, his only two options were to outright ask Zhou if he was picking a fight or

stay quiet and smile sarcastically. What really mattered here was that Zhou had spoken these words as their head of state.

“Surely, some of our citizens understand this logic,” Urabe said. “Although I cannot publicly accept this, I do understand that your country must have had its reasons to act. Do you intend to continue upholding such policies in the future? If so, I believe it would be extremely difficult for us to provide you with our assistance.”

“Policies can be changed. To be honest, I think it is time to stop pursuing such strategies of deflecting public opinion to outside enemies to divert their attention from the issues in our country. To be more precise, we are prepared to abandon our claims on the Ryukyu Islands, destroy the facilities of anti-Japanese propaganda, such as the Memorial of the Nanjing Massacre, and forbid the production and broadcasting of anti-Japanese movies.”

Urabe stayed quiet, nodding twice. He had expected the Sinese to make some concessions, but he hadn’t thought they would go as far as to reverse their whole stance. At the same time, he couldn’t help but think that what President Zhou offered held very few direct advantages for Japan. If you were to say it shortly and less politely, he had basically said, “We’re stopping our anti-Japan policy, so cooperate with us,” or “We don’t outright hate you, so help us.” Most Japanese citizens would only wonder why they should care after hearing this.

“I can feel your sincere intentions to greatly improve Sinese-Japanese relations from now on. May I ask what type of assistance you’re hoping to receive from us?”

“We hope you will teach us how to put an effective civilian adventurer system in place as well as how to train adventurers. We’re also interested in your hydrogen energy technology.”

Urabe cast his eyes downward and exhaled quietly. He could not agree with these conditions in the slightest. As far as diplomacy was concerned, improving their relationship with Sina was a huge plus. In order to emerge victorious in the double election that would be held in June, he wanted to show great results after this summit. However, there was no need to sacrifice national interests to rush results. The dungeon clearing in the country was moving at a good pace,

which, in turn, made his approval rate go up. He already had a good shot at winning the elections.

“President Zhou, these conditions are not acceptable for our country. I believe we need to discuss this matter further.”

Zhou Haoran nodded. He was not surprised. If anything, receiving a blanket agreement so soon would have surprised him much more. He had been able to confirm their mutual goal to advance together into the future. Now, they only needed to work out the details. Everyone in the room realized the situation was critical and waited, tense expressions on their faces.

* * *

Following the first day of exchanges between the two leaders, the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stayed busy with talks well into the night. President Zhou Haoran was expected to stay in Japan for five days. Both the Japanese and Sinese sides knew that reaching a consensus during that time was absolutely necessary.

“I appreciate their will to turn the anti-Japanese sentiment in Sina around, as well as their offer to withdraw from the Ryukyus. They have been willing to make many concessions regarding fishing rights and intellectual property rights. However, I doubt our citizens will be satisfied with these alone.”

“They don’t seem willing to back the economic sanctions on the Kingdom of Ko, and they definitely will not accept or recognize the independence of the Republic of Sina. They’ll dismiss any qualms about human rights as interference in their domestic affairs.”

The hydrogen energy technology that had been made possible by the magic stones would soon completely change the status quo of the economy on a global scale. It would without a doubt become invaluable in the future—a market worth hundreds of trillions of yen. If such things were taken into account, having Sina simply stop their current backhanded harassment was nowhere near enough.

“However, I don’t think pushing too much is wise either. If the Kingdom of Ko and the Republic of Woori end up reunifying, we’ll be faced with a bloc hostile to Japan armed with nuclear weapons right at our doorstep. To prevent this, we

need to develop a good relationship with the Oriental Republic of Sina.”

Prime Minister Urabe continued.

“We could surely negotiate that Japanese companies get to handle the setting up of the Sinese hydrogen power plants and make sure they are contracted preferentially for public works projects. We could derive some more advantages from this. If we manage to have them import the materials for these projects from Japan instead of sourcing them directly in Sina, we’ll be able to give the Japanese market another boost.”

“Can we really trust them? Although Japan supported them in the past to implement high-speed rails, they ended up pretending their own country developed the technology and even exported it to other places. Isn’t it likely that they’ll act the same with the hydrogen energy technology? Even if President Zhou himself is trustworthy, can the same be said about the whole country?”

The gap between the two countries was big. Due to the anti-Japanese policies that had been pushed in Sina for the past forty years, a deep distrust of Sina had emerged in Japan. When it came down to it, international relations were based on trust. Sina had repeatedly harmed the mutual trust between itself and Japan. The time to face those consequences had come.

Finally, after hours of debate, someone whispered, “I suppose we have no other choice but to have President Zhou demonstrate his resolve.”

“How?”

“By completely getting rid of the current anti-Japanese sentiment and starting anew. As the head of the country, he should lead by example and show us how committed Sina is.”

“But how would he do it? If we just make a joint declaration and sign a treaty, I doubt we’ll see much change.”

“There is one way to go about it. After we have a particular place in Japan... A place that has continually garnered the criticism of the Sinese.”

After exchanging glances, another debate regarding the feasibility of this plan immediately started.



[Chiyoda City, Kudanzaka]

A black car left Motoakasaka through Hanzomon and turned right after Chidorigafuchi, continuing on towards Kudanshita. Zhou Haoran looked through the window, taking note of how much time had passed. When he returned to Sina, he'd need to focus his efforts on increasing his control over his party. He'd need to rely heavily on the media and make full use of the propaganda machine in order to overturn the anti-Japanese sentiment that had been deeply rooted in Sina for the past forty years. Up until now, they had intentionally avoided broadcasting shows and news regarding Meng Zemin and Tamura Kakuei or Japan's ODA support. By highlighting this sort of positive Sina-Japan relations, it would be easier to wash their hands of the current trends and direct the public opinion in another direction, one that would support future collaboration with Japan. He had to make sure to become the symbol of this change.

"Mr. President, are you sure this is really a good idea? For you to visit such a place..."

"Well, two Japanese Prime Ministers have also visited our Museum of the War of Chinese People's Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, haven't they? If I go visit that shrine, I'll finally reciprocate. Do you not think it would be foolish to stop ourselves from moving forward because of events that are so far back in the past we have only ever heard of them and never experienced them ourselves?"

Before long, the car stopped and Zhou Haoran stepped out. The cherry trees had started to bud in the nice March weather. Zhou took a deep breath and, finally, stepped forward. For the first time in history, a Sinese President was visiting Yasukuni Shrine.

"Humanity is currently being threatened by an unprecedented event. We cannot let ourselves be tied down by the past indefinitely. We need to free ourselves and come together to face our present—and future—threats. Thanks to President Zhou's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, Sina-Japan relations will now undergo great change. We Japanese also need to change the way we think. From the very first steps of our nation, we have continuously learned from the

Sinese civilization and maintained a good relationship throughout the ages. I believe the time has come to build a relationship of mutual trust between our two countries anew.”

The Japanese Prime Minister and the President of the Oriental Republic of Sina made a joint declaration as they stood in front of Yasukuni Shrine. At the same time, the signature of a new treaty of friendship between the two countries was announced. The treaty included clauses to comprehensively solve most disputes between Japan and Sina, including their territorial disputes and diverging historical perspectives, as well as details on how Japanese companies were to handle work on the hydrogen power plants that were to be built in Sina. This also helped strengthen the economic cooperation between Japan and Sina.

As for the Woorian peninsula, it was announced that they wished to join the IDAO and effectively participate in the fight against the dungeons.



[Yokohama Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“The Oriental Republic of Sina is going all out. To be honest, I didn’t think President Zhou would go this far. Public opinion seems to be favorable towards our new cooperation with Sina as well. As expected, Yasukuni is quite the strong symbol,” Ishihara said.

“You’re right. Seeing the direction things are headed, Asian countries may very well emerge as new world leaders after the dungeons are cleared,” I answered.

I was having a meal with Ishihara, discussing the recent summit between the Japanese and Sinese leaders. She had come to check out Yokohama Dungeon. The part that surprised me most about the new policies was that Sina would accept applications from Japanese adventurers to go clear dungeons in its territory.

“To be honest, they don’t have the leeway to worry about that. More than eighty dungeons have already appeared in Sina. By the time they finish emerging, that number might shoot up all the way up to one hundred twenty. They’ve been forced to close off roads and factories, since most of the

dungeons are located in dense, metropolitan areas. Just keeping these areas in check with the army is already costing them a tremendous amount of money. On top of that, there's the issue of recruiting civilians. Even if they were to limit the number of people to five hundred per dungeon, that would still mean up to sixty thousand people. If each person mines magic stones worth around one hundred million yen each year, the total budget required to pay them would be over six hundred trillion yen. It could even end up being two or three times as much. If they don't time the opening of the hydrogen power plants and the implementation of the civilian adventurer system perfectly, the Sinese economy will collapse on the spot."

"We're doing pretty well on that front in Japan, aren't we? I intend to have Kanazawa Dungeon cleared by the end of the month. After that, we can probably remodel Sapporo Dungeon. I'll make sure that every dungeon in Japan is eventually turned into a perfect mining spot."

I finished my three-hundred-gram steak in no time and ordered some more food. Ishihara looked a bit exasperated as she sipped her coffee. After a while, she seemed to suddenly remember something.

"By the way, how are the Crusaders doing? Did they get better?" she asked.

"They haven't reached Rank C yet. I feel slightly guilty, but I'm having them undergo a little experiment. I'm looking for an effective way to reach Rank C, to push through the species limit... I'm trying to see whether the determining factor is the number of monsters killed, the length of time spent fighting continuously, or the maximum weight one is able to carry while fighting... I want to get precise data. Eventually, I hope to find a surefire method to get to Rank C in the shortest time possible and use it to establish a training regimen designed to raise Rank C adventurers."

"If possible, I'd love to use your method on JSDF soldiers, but..." Ishihara paused. "It may be better to avoid publicizing it."

"Did some civilian adventurer finally commit a crime?" I asked, after thinking for a little while.

"It has yet to happen in Japan, but Rank D soldiers have caused several violent incidents in Gamera. In South Gamera, there seems to be trouble due to the

mafia monopolizing the dungeons in order to commit crimes. Similar trouble is occurring in the Middle East. Things are finally starting to sour.”

“A Rank C adventurer can’t even be compared to a Rank D adventurer in terms of physical prowess. Even with no weapons, they’d have no problem conducting terrorist attacks. It would be very helpful to have an item that could assess a person’s Rank, but I haven’t been able to find anything like that in the gacha yet.”

“Japan is currently ahead in terms of dungeon research. This means we’re that much more likely to become the target of espionage or terrorist attacks led by other countries. The authorities are preparing to minimize such risks, but if the attacker ends up being a Rank C adventurer, only another person of the same rank could hope to handle them.”

The people who have been strengthened by the dungeons were even more dangerous than the dungeons themselves. The ways Enhancement Element impacted people were still far from being understood, but some believed that they were linked to individual traits and personalities. I had also witnessed firsthand how the Enhancement Element could drive living beings to brutal behaviors by experimenting on rats. I didn’t think I had undergone any change myself, but I may have been impacted in some ways too.

If I were to lose my mind and become a crazed beast...

I shook my head. I couldn’t do anything, even if I kept thinking about it, and stabbed the sliced meat in front of me with my fork.



[Kanazawa Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

At the end of March, I entered Kanazawa Dungeon along with the Crusaders—each of whom had finally reached Rank C—with the intention of clearing it.

Name:	Rolf Schnabel
Title:	Species Limit Breaker
Rank:	C
Possession Limit:	0/29

Skills: Card Slot, Shield Bash (Lvl. 7), Sword Mastery (Lvl. 6)

Name: Alberta Reigenbach

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0/28

Skills: Card Slot, Sword Mastery (Lvl. 9), Body Strengthening (Lvl. 5)

Name: Léonard Chartres

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0/22

Skills: Card Slot, Holy Magic (Lvl. 8), Spirit Magic (Lvl. 4)

Name: Chloe Fontaine

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0/25

Skills: Card Slot, Esoteric Magic (Lvl. 9), Invocation (Lvl. 1)

Name: Franca Bezzini

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0/26

Skills: Card Slot, Reconnaissance (Lvl. 8), Dagger Mastery (Lvl. 5)

Name: Marco Montale

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 0/28

Skills: Card Slot, Unarmed Mastery (Lvl. 8), Body Strengthening (Lvl. 5)

For the past two weeks, the training of the Crusaders had been even more formidable than that of the Dungeon Busters. Part of the reason was that I was starting to get restless myself. I was training the Crusaders in accordance with the Vatican's request, but that meant that I had to limit the activities of Dungeon Busters. Simply put, my wish to get things wrapped up as soon as possible pushed me to train them more harshly.

"You went from Rank F to Rank C in such a short time. You have truly worked hard. We'll give your training one finishing touch here in Kanazawa. I want you to clear this dungeon. Of course, I can't allow you to claim ownership of it, but I'm sure you'll have no issues clearing more dungeons in Europe using the experience gained here from going through every floor and defeating the Guardian."

Kazuemachi was an old area in Kanazawa close to the Asano River. That's why the natives had dubbed it "The Flow." Along with Higashiyama—"The East"—and Nomachi—"The West"—it was one of the three old teahouse districts of Kanazawa. We held the pre-dungeon clearing party at a restaurant that specialized in hot pot situated in The Flow called Kaga Tarou. Besides myself, Akira, Rinko, Masayoshi, Amane, and Hisato had joined us. Our party of twelve—six Busters and the six Crusaders—sat across each other. The restaurant's tatami room could normally seat as many as thirty customers, but I had decided to rent it out today.

"All right, let's celebrate in advance! Let's have a toast to the growth of the Crusaders and the clearing of Kanazawa Dungeon. Cheers!"

It had only been twenty days if we were to count in above ground time. In dungeon time, however, we had already spent almost two years together. Although we had different reasons for doing so, our strong will to clear the dungeons was the same. They'd head back to the Vatican after clearing Kanazawa Dungeon, and I was a bit emotional about it.

"Kazu, why d'ya look so down? Ah! You must be depressed because we're

leaving soon, huh?” Franca said.

The few cups of sake she’d drunk had put her in a good mood. She had held many doubts regarding her activities as a member of the Crusaders, but she seemed to have finally gotten over it. Now, she was a scout, an irreplaceable part of the team.

On the other hand, Chloe spewed out complaint after complaint regarding the outfit she had gotten from the gacha. Apparently, she wasn’t happy with the design of her Rare gear, Mage Cloak.

“Uuuuuh. The clothes Lyrica Moe-tan wears are colorful and have frills! Magical girls don’t wear such stiff and boorish clothes!!!”

Chloe had been rolling the gacha again and again without permission, hoping to get equipment that looked like what her favorite anime character wore. Of course, she had been quickly forbidden from keeping any cards on her. In my opinion, wearing frilly clothes with a lot of exposure while fighting was practically asking to get killed, but according to Chloe, appearance was key for magical girls.

“Chloe, we’re in the real world, you know? And there are still many unknown items in the gacha. The equipment you want might come out eventually,” Léonard said softly, trying to stop Chloe from drowning her sorrow in alcohol.

Léonard had been a seminary student before joining the Crusaders and was naturally the most pious among them. Before entering a dungeon, he would always offer a prayer to God. In terms of position, Léonard’s role was more or less that of a priest or holy mage. One could say he was an absolute necessity for the group, taking the background of the Crusaders into account. Catholicism was a crucial part of culture in the Anglo-Saxon world. As such, Léonard’s presence brought a great deal of stability to the team and helped the others keep their peace of mind.

“Can’t you be a little quieter? And you, Marco, don’t sit with your knees up. Such bad manners. We’re in a tatami room. You should sit in seiza while eating,” Alberta said, admonishing her teammates.

From her appearance and her blonde hair, one would never guess how devoted to the Japanese culture she was. Among the twelve people in the

room, she was the only one sitting in seiza properly. Even when I told her she could relax and sit more comfortably, she immediately refused.

“In Reich, we have a stewed dish called eintopf that is quite similar to this hot pot. However, it’s a very simple, common dish eaten in households, not something you would ever see in such a classy place. Japan is very impressive in that regard. Even a dish as simple as a hot pot has many variations depending on the region and can be eaten at home as well as in luxurious restaurants. Reich cuisine is not as diverse,” Rolf explained in a very manly way as he enjoyed the hot pot, using his chopsticks like an expert.

I could see why Mutsuo would want a picture of him. I could see him getting popular in certain circles.

“So, what are we doing after this? Akkii told me there are some fun places ‘exclusive to Japan.’ I wanna check them out!”

Marco’s personality was very similar to Akira’s. They seemed to get along quite well, and I had even overheard them joke around while training in the dungeon. Of course, they still did what they had to and never went overboard, so the other members didn’t seem to mind their banter. Every team needed a fun person to lift up the mood. *Although, I guess two is a bit much...*

“Kazuhiko, can I ask you a serious question?” Rolf, who was sitting in front of me, spoke up. “I’ve been wondering about this for a while, but Dungeon Busters’s goal is to clear the dungeons, right? In spite of this, you have been preserving them. Don’t you think it’s quite contradictory?”

He took a sip of a famous Japanese beer and grimaced slightly. It appeared he wasn’t quite fond of it.

“As expected, Reich beer is the best there is,” he mumbled quietly.

“I don’t think I’m being contradictory. I define dungeon clearing as the act of turning off the Monster Stampede in the Dungeon Cores settings. I’m also quite curious about the reliefs that we’ve found on the bottom floor of each dungeon. For these reasons, I’ve concluded that there is no need to erase them.”

“Are you sure? I personally feel like these reliefs might be a trap. They’re

showing us something that seems meaningful so that we won't erase the dungeons. I don't think the Stampede setting means anything. We turn the Stampede off and feel safe, but when the time comes, monsters will still emerge from every remaining dungeon, including the ones that were turned off..."

I said nothing in reply.

I couldn't say this was impossible. Too much was still unknown about the dungeons. Even though Akane and the others had told me the reliefs were important, they didn't know what their significance was. They may very well be important because they were a trap.

Seeing I was lost in thought, Rolf continued.

"I believe that we ought to fully erase the dungeons. As for the reliefs, we can keep pictures of them. It is true that the hydrogen energy we can produce using the magic stones is a very attractive prospect, but I can't help but wonder whether it really is a good idea to rely on some unknown energy from another world to fix our energy issues. Us humans should keep working together to figure out another solution on our own. At least, that's what I believe."

"I understand where you're coming from," I said. "The most foolproof solution to fully get rid of the Monster Stampede threat would indeed be to erase the dungeons. However, this would also bring about some disadvantages. Not being able to use the magic stones or the gacha system anymore would be a pity. You took that into account, and you still think that we ought to erase the dungeon, right?"

"It's only my opinion. I don't intend to reject your way of doing things. I just wanted you to take the possibility of a trap into consideration. I will discuss this with the DRDC as soon as I go back to the Vatican as well. I'll let them know that I believe erasing the dungeons is for the best."



I nodded silently. If the Crusaders decided to go down this path, I would not try to stop them. No one understood anything about the dungeons. For all we knew, even if we erased every single one of them, another 666 dungeons might just suddenly pop up anew in ten years and cause a Monster Stampede. In the end, the best I could do was to decide for myself what the right thing to do was.

“We’re in Japan. I can’t let the Crusaders handle the dungeon clearing here. When we reach the bottom floor, I want you to let us, the Busters, do as we see fit with the Dungeon Core. However, I’ll still let the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau know about your theory. After all, there’s no way to know who is right,” I answered, putting an end to this conversation.

I picked up a bottle of sake and offered Rolf some. He held out his glass, and I poured him some Kaga Tarou original cold sake.

* * *

A Rank C dungeon was way too easy for our team, which was made up of two B-Rankers and ten C-Rankers. After reaching Floor 4 and easily defeating elder orcs, the members of the Crusaders appeared to want to linger a little while longer to train. However, we couldn’t really afford to waste much more time on our side. Our new headquarters was finally finished, and all that was left was to officially get the keys. After that, we would quickly handle the dungeons in Funabashi and Sendai before taking a shot at clearing the Rank A dungeon, Abyss. For this sake, we wanted to be done with Kanazawa Dungeon as fast as possible.

“We’re heading to Floor 5. From what we’ve been able to observe until now, it seems like the bottom floor always comes after three or four floors with Rank C monsters.”

On Floor 5, the six members of the Crusaders came face-to-face with six goblin soldiers. In this dungeon, you could train your solo fighting abilities on the first four floors, but from Floor 5 onward, it was time to practice fighting in teams. This was a very convenient place for adventurers to train in.

“Kazuhiko, I’d like for us to keep fighting here for another four hours. It’ll be good practice for us,” Rolf requested.

Since Rolf asked, we decided to make camp on Floor 5 for a while. When we entered Floor 6, the monster that appeared was the blue minotaur—the same monster that had acted as guardian in Sapporo Dungeon. It was a Rank C monster that was close to Rank B, but since it acted alone, it wouldn't be too hard for the Crusaders to defeat it if they fought together.

“Aniki, isn't that bad news? We know next to nothing about Rank B monsters, right?” asked Akira.

“Yeah. If a blue minotaur comes out now, it means that the next floor is probably the last, and the probability that the guardian is Rank B is very high. N'gie hasn't reached Rank B yet. I'll materialize Shifu Liu, Akane, and Emily, just in case.”

The blue minotaur was also a good training target. The six of them needed strong teamwork to be able to defeat one stronger monster. Once the Crusaders finished the first fight, we took the front. Since Akira and I, two B-Rankers, were here, it wouldn't end up being such a hard fight for us. We let the other four handle most of the work and Akira dealt the final blow. Allowing them to accumulate more experience was also my role as the leader.

As expected, Floor 7 was the last. It was made up of a straight path and a relief on the ceiling, as always.

“They seem to be...arguing?”

On the relief, the figures of a young man and an old person appeared to be discussing something. We had no idea who these characters might be nor what they could be discussing. Rolf, who was standing next to me and looking up at the ceiling, snapped a picture.

“It does seem to mean something but I can't help but think it has to be a trap. Regardless of my opinion, this dungeon belongs to the Busters. We won't question your decision.”

We entered the guardian's chamber. A red monster and a blue monster were sitting side by side, each one holding a spiked club with both hands. The sight would immediately ring a bell for any Japanese person who entered the room. Just to make sure, I called upon Shifu Liu and asked him what he knew about these.

“They’re B-Rank monsters, oni. They can’t use magic and will only attack with the clubs they’re holding. They’re lone warriors and won’t cooperate. This is perfect. Let’s have Rolf’s team take care of the blue oni while you fight the red one. What do you think?”

“But...Aniki and I are both B-Rankers, and the Crusaders only have C-Rank members. Shouldn’t we give them a hand?” Akira asked.

“There’s no need for that. Once we exit this dungeon, we’ll head back to the Vatican. We can’t keep relying on the Busters forever. This is the perfect occasion to graduate. You guys agree, right?”

All of the Crusaders approved Rolf’s words. If they were able to defeat a foe stronger than themselves in a mortal battle, they’d surely become more confident in their skills. Akira was also convinced.

“Let’s go then. We take the red, you guys take the blue. Don’t die, all right?”

And so, the battle to the death with the guardians of Kanazawa Dungeon started.

* * *

[Kanazawa Dungeon — Rolf Schnabel]

“Hmmpf!”

The club of the blue oni—blue ogre—connected with my shield. I almost got thrown back by the tremendous impact, but I somehow held my ground. Making use of that time, Franca slipped behind it, slashing it several times with her dagger. However, her attack was nothing more than a diversion. While the monster was paying attention to Franca, Chloe cast her magic and launched one fireball after another at it.

This didn’t seem to do much damage to the oni. It was worthy of being Rank B. As expected, things wouldn’t be as easy as they had been with the monsters on Floor 4.

“Leave it to me!”

Marco landed a strong kick on the blue oni’s thigh. Now that he was Rank C, Marco’s kick was powerful enough to neatly break a log. The oni fell to one

knee with a jerk.

“Now!”

Alberta lunged at it from behind. She wielded her bastard sword effortlessly and made a clean cut from the monster’s right shoulder to its lower back in one go. However...

“GAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

Although it was still unable to stand up, the oni suddenly rotated its body, slamming the back of its hand right into Alberta. She managed to block the hit somewhat with her shoulder, but the strength of the blow still sent her flying into a wall.

The blue oni was currently contorted, having lost its balance. It was our best chance to land a fatal hit. We couldn’t miss this opportunity.

“Ooooh!!!”

I attacked and tried to plunge my Middle Sword through the oni’s throat. However, it was ready to attack again before I could reach it. Instead of hitting me with the back of its hand, it threw a hook right at my face. This was still within my expectations. There was no way a Rank B monster would go down so easily. I bent my knees, ducking right as it recovered its stance and threw a punch, and felt a gust of wind over my head.

Making use of my low position, I closed in and thrust my sword upward. I thought that would do it, but the oni opened its mouth and caught the sword between its teeth. For a second, I lost hope. Yet, the next moment, a fireball hit the monster right in the face, and its hold on my weapon loosened slightly. I used all my strength to push my sword into its mouth. My sword encountered a bit of resistance, but soon, the eyes of the oni that had been glaring at me turned lifeless.

Thus, we succeeded in clearing our first dungeon here in Kanazawa.



[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

The Crusaders’s training was now over. They had all reached Rank C and

successfully cleared a dungeon. From now on, they could train on their own. We had reported to the Vatican through the Ministry of Defense for the last time and wrapped things up. The Vatican would be sending us the remaining payment for completing the mission later that day.

The Crusaders didn't hold a press conference after this but rather immediately made their way to Narita. Although it was known that they had worked with us, they couldn't very well announce to the world that they'd become so strong all thanks to Dungeon Busters or anything along those lines. The will of God had made them stronger. That was how things ought to be.

"Are you sure you're okay with how things turned out? I'm sure you could convince them to join the Busters instead, if you wished," Director General Ishihara teased.

She was right; they would have made good additions. Trying to poach them would be a mistake, however, when taking the bigger picture into consideration. The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon was a worldwide disaster. How would things turn out if we tried to fix it with Japanese groups alone? There was no way the citizens of Western countries would accept that the dungeons in their own territories belonged to Japan. Back when Japan had experienced an economic bubble thirty years ago, a Japanese person had bought the Empire State Building and had immediately been faced with harsh criticism and opposition from Gamericans. This time, the anti-Japan sentiment would be much stronger.

"I intend to let them take care of European and Gamerican dungeons. If we don't, some president would most definitely complain about 'yellow people' taking hold of property inside their country, wouldn't they?" I asked.

"True. They have been oppressing people of color for hundreds of years. Even if they suddenly started pretending that discrimination was bad or that human rights were important in the middle of the last century, who would actually trust them? They should experience colonization for seven hundred years themselves before they start spouting such idealistic nonsense."

"I didn't mean to go there." I forced a smile as I tried to bring this radical conversation to a close. "I just think that, in the long run, it'd be better if the

Crusaders stayed an independent entity.”

All in all, Ishihara seemed to despise Gamera. I didn’t have such strong feelings, but I still couldn’t help but think that our cultures were very different. Gamera’s was rooted in the belief in one single god while Japan was polytheist. By definition, monotheism rejected every other god.

Rolf might not think this way, but the Vatican probably could not accept the very existence of the dungeons. After all, they could threaten the foundations of the Catholic Church. The pope spoke of diversity in his speech, but behind the scenes, he surely wished for the complete annihilation of the dungeons.

“We’ll continue exchanging information with the Crusaders in the future,” Ishihara said. “Since Gamera is still keeping to itself, we need to maintain a good relationship with the EU. Our cooperation with the Vatican should also become an advantage when dealing with Rushi.”

“I’ll leave those considerations to the politicians and government officials. I’m a buster. My job is to clear dungeons. With our headquarters finally operational, I’ll aim for Rank A now.”

“We only have nineteen days left until Full Activation,” Ishihara stated. “On top of that, there will be an election in June. If the ruling party manages to win, the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau will officially become a Ministry, and we’ll be able to conduct affairs more easily. On the other hand, things might become a little complicated if the opposition comes to power. As a government official, I can’t ask you, a civilian, to endorse one party or another, but please try to clear as many dungeons as possible.”

The more dungeons the Busters were able to clear, the better Japan’s reputation would become abroad. This would also positively affect Urabe’s approval rating. I wasn’t a conservative or a right-winger, but I definitely wanted to avoid the election of some of the parties who were still saying that dungeons ought to only be safeguarded by the government.

“You don’t need to ask. I *will* try to clear as many dungeons as I possibly can. However, we’re going to need some new members soon. I’d be grateful if you could put some effort into not only the Boot Camp Initiative but also recruiting civilian adventurers on your end.”

Sitting in a room in the Ministry of Defense, we continued to discuss our future plans. In the clear, blue spring sky, a plane flew past, leaving behind a white trail.

* * *

Shishibone, located in Edogawa City, Tokyo, was a twenty-minute bus ride away from Koiwa Station on the Sobu Line or Mizue Station on the Toei Shinjuku Line. It was located right in the middle of a railway blind spot, so a car was a necessity to commute. On the day the cherry trees in Shinozaki Park bloomed, a bunch of cars and trucks were gathered in a corner of Shishibone. In front of them, an area over 650 square meters was enclosed by a two-meter-tall wall of reinforced concrete that appeared to be white due to the photocatalytic paint we had used.

“It’s finally complete...”

Dungeon Busters’s new base had been designed as a concave building, made to fully surround the entrance of the Rank A dungeon Abyss. Although I called it the Busters’s base, the only person who would actually live here was me. Akira, Mutsuo, and the others were living in a mansion closer to the Mizue/Shinozaki/Koiwa area.

Today was the day the general affairs department and the IT department moved into the new office space. General Manager Mukai and Mutsuo had also come to witness the move.

“Let’s check the office. Everything should have arrived already.”

General Manager Mukai already owned a house in Tachikawa, but he was currently staying at the Mizue mansion during the workweek. Since the employees all had two full days off, he went back home on the weekends.

“I have been causing you a lot of trouble, Mukai-san, but I hope we can continue working together.”

“Going from Tachikawa to Mizue is a little over one hour by car, so it can’t be helped. To be honest, I’m having fun experiencing life as a bachelor once again. Please don’t worry about it so much.”

“Ezoe-shiiiiii!” Mutsuo cut in, appearing along with the rest of the IT

department—or I should say, his doujinshi friends—holding a blueprint of the whole headquarters building.

“We should check that everything’s good. We’d better put some security cameras around the building and a searchlight on the roof too,” one of his teammates, a young man wearing glasses, explained. I thought his name was Yamamoto Junji, or something along those lines.

“Yamamoto-shi used to be in charge of inventing security systems at his previous firm, so he’s good at this sort of thing. We should up security a little, since the Busters’s headquarters could very well become a target for terrorist groups.”

“I see. I’ll leave that to you then. Of course, we also need to be prepared to face humans, but...” I lowered my voice, as this wasn’t something that should be mentioned in front of too many people. “If the Stampede happens before we’ve been able to neutralize the dungeon, this will also become a defense line. Please prepare accordingly.”

Mutsuo nodded, a very serious look on his face.

* * *

In front of the building was a parking lot that could fit five cars, and surrounding the courtyard from the right side to the backmost part of the facilities were lodgings for adventurers. Each apartment was approximately thirty-five square meters with a separate kitchen, bath, and toilet, as well as a loft of around eight square meters. I intended to have our new recruits train in Abyss and had prepared facilities accordingly so that they could immediately move in. The rooms were all fully furnished. There were eight apartments on both the second and third floors for a total of sixteen apartments. The building was made of concrete, and every room was soundproof. Being constantly with others was a source of stress. They should be allowed some privacy in the comfort of their own rooms, at the very least.

On the first floor, there were shower rooms, a cafeteria, and conference rooms. The cafeteria was over 150 square meters, so even if the Busters numbered a hundred in the future, it was big enough that everyone would be able to sit and eat together. As for the kitchen, we had relocated a commercial

kitchen as-is. The shower rooms allowed the adventurers to wash off as soon as they came out of Abyss. The conference rooms could seat up to eight people around a table and were equipped with a whiteboard and a monitor that could project a PC screen.

Office space occupied the first and second floors of the building on the left-hand side. If we recruited more busters, we would also need to recruit more staff members. To anticipate future growth, I had allocated a large amount of space from the start. For now, all of our staff would work on the first floor, though a separate office had been prepared for the IT department.

Mutsuo and his friends had brought colorful posters and weird dolls with them. *Well... As long as the job is done, I don't really care about the rest.*

Finally, the third floor of the left-hand building was to be my personal living space. However, a two-bedroom apartment with a full dining room, kitchen, and spare room was too large for a bachelor to handle on his own, and considering the nature of my work, it would be safer to avoid outside cleaning staff. For this reason, I had asked Mari's mother, Shiori, to help me clean once a week.

One of the rooms could only be entered by people to whom I had given access beforehand. The whole building already had a system to control who went in and out, but another system using fingerprints and retinal scans had been installed in this particular location—card storage.

I had thought long and hard about how to deal with the Monster Cards and the Item Cards we'd obtained through the gacha. If some intelligence agency decided to go all out in order to steal them, a home security system would do nothing to stop them. The cards that were under the care of Dungeon Busters Inc. were kept in an underground vault and constantly monitored using RFID. The cards and the money (or magic stones) that the buster candidates accumulated would also be securely stored in our vault. I had heavily relied on General Manager Mukai for this, who had been a bank employee in the past and was very skilled at dealing with the storage and inventory control of cash.

I went to stand in the middle of the courtyard before an iron door locked with a padlock. Beyond this door was the stairway that led to Abyss. It was enclosed

by stone walls and fences, and even a roof that rested on four pillars had been installed. From there, stone steps continued all the way to the entrance of the shower rooms. At first glance, it looked somewhat like a garden pavilion.

Kashiwagi Reina came to stand by my side. “Is that the entrance?” she asked.

My encounter with her had been quite curious. We first met in Yokohama Dungeon when it had appeared six months ago before she eventually started working for Dungeon Busters. As part of the general affairs department, she was in charge of handling all traveling and accommodation arrangements.

All of our staff, including her, knew about Abyss. They were unable to leak the information, thanks to the effect of the contracts I had obtained through the gacha, but the existence of this dungeon would have to be revealed soon anyway. When the time came, there would be no harm in getting rid of the contracts.

“It’s been half a year since I last entered it through the front door. But, well... I’ve been coming and going using Teleportation from time to time, so I don’t feel like it’s been that long,” I said.

I took out the key to the padlock from the bunch of keys I kept on me and removed the seal that kept Abyss’s entrance off-limit. The padlock had already started to rust slightly from the rain. I used one hand to effortlessly lift the iron door and the stairway that led underground came into view.



At the time the members of Dungeon Busters were moving into their new office, Rolf, the leader of the Crusaders, was finishing up his report to the cardinal in charge of the DRDC. He explained that they had all reached Rank C and proposed that whenever they cleared a European dungeon in the future, they would erase it rather than keep it around.

“I understand your concerns. However, the EU has already made the decision to preserve the dungeons. We can’t erase them as we please. If we act rashly, the Crusaders will no longer be allowed to operate in Europe.”

“Wasn’t the EU’s resolution that every country does as they see fit with the dungeons in their territories?” Rolf asked. “In Reich, the government is already

moving forward with the idea of erasing the dungeon that appeared next to Berlin Central Station. If a dungeon was to suddenly appear right in St. Peter's Basilica, wouldn't the Church decide to erase it?"

"As I understand it, you intend to prioritize clearing the dungeons that may be erased, don't you? I have no qualms with this. You have full authority to decide which dungeons to handle and in what order."

Rolf bowed to the cardinal and exited the room. He tried to identify all the merits of erasing the dungeons in his head. In Vienna, for instance, a dungeon had appeared in the gardens of Schönbrunn Palace. In Paris, one had emerged right in the middle of the Champs-Élysées. Another had appeared next to the Piazza di Spagna in Rome. These places were all extremely famous tourist spots. However, local economies suffered since they had to be closed down. Erasing dungeons meant returning to normalcy. If he could get the people to realize this, more voices would rise, claiming that the dungeons were not needed.

"The Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon is not the feat of our Lord. We cannot explain it with modern science. These things do nothing but throw our society into turmoil and should be destroyed as soon as possible."

Having strengthened his resolve, Rolf left the Curia.



[Osaka Dungeon — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On the eighth of April, after having finished the move to the new headquarters, I headed to Osaka Dungeon before diving in to clear Funabashi Dungeon. Due to the Crusaders's training, I had pushed back the investigation, but since our headquarters was now ready, it was time to seriously start our dungeon-clearing endeavor. For this sake, I wanted to know what the most ominous dungeon to appear so far looked like.

I had brought along Akane, Emily, and N'gie, who had recently joined us. Akira and the others were enjoying their break and taking it easy before we cleared the dungeon.

"I see," I said after a pause. "The structure is different from the other dungeons we've seen so far."

I took the subway from Osaka Station towards Umeda. The underground parking lot in which the dungeon had appeared had been closed off to the public and was under the custody of the JSDF. As I went down into this dungeon that we assumed to be Rank S, I noticed that, unlike the other dungeons, the first floor didn't start with a Safety Zone. It started with a maze right from the get-go.

I immediately materialized Akane.

"This is a Rank S dungeon. Its name is..."

As she spoke, the mechanical voice of the Dungeon System rang in my ears. I thought it would just tell me the name of the dungeon, but I was left astonished instead.

<A Species Limit Breaker has trespassed into the S Rank dungeon Avaritia. The Full Activation of the Dungeon System has been launched. ETA to the Full Activation: one rotation.>

"What?!"

The Full Activation was supposed to happen on the twenty-fourth of June, but according to the voice just now, it would be effective in twenty-four hours. That meant all the remaining dungeons would suddenly appear within the next day.

"Akane! What is going on?!"

"I apologize. I do not understand the situation either," she said.

"Neither do I!" Emily added immediately. "What's going on?!"

"I...hungry..." N'gie said.

I was completely panicking now. At any rate, the first thing I needed to do was to alert the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. As I hurried back to the stairs, Akane tapped my shoulder.

"Kazuhiko-sama, please calm down first. Before going back, you need to assess the situation. If you stay inside the dungeon, you will have more time to think."

Breathing hard, I slapped my cheeks and crouched down right on the spot. I exhaled slowly.

“Ah. And here’s a monster...” I sighed.

“Master, if you’re going to stay inside a dungeon to think, you should head back to Abyss. You won’t be able to concentrate here because of all these pesky monsters,” Emily suggested before launching a magic attack at the goblin that had come running our way, weapon in hand.

Even though this was a Rank S dungeon, the monsters on Floor 1 would never be over Rank B. The goblin disappeared without a trace, and I finally started calming down.

“I’ll go back to Abyss for now. I have a whiteboard there. I’ll focus on analyzing the situation first.”

I turned Akane and the others back into cards and moved to the Safe Zone of Abyss.

* * *

“So... When a Species Limit Breaker—an adventurer of Rank C or above—enters a Rank S dungeon, the Dungeon System fully activates at once, right?” Ishihara asked.

After analyzing the situation and putting together a plan to deal with the aftermath, I immediately teleported myself to the front of the security checkpoint at the Ministry of Defense. The guards nearly passed out from seeing a human suddenly appear in front of their eyes, but I didn’t have time to explain. I immediately called Director General Ishihara. I only told her the most important part—that the Full Activation would occur twenty-four hours from now—and she canceled all of her other appointments on the spot to make time for me.

I explained what happened in Osaka Dungeon, and Ishihara nodded, showing me an expression that seemed to say she understood. We couldn’t be sure whether the Full Activation would truly happen, of course.

“It would be for the best if I just misunderstood, but...”

We had no proof. The only thing we could say was that I’d heard the Dungeon System’s voice. Ishihara didn’t think we could issue a warning to every country in the world based on that. We cruelly lacked time. We decided to work out our

plans with the assumption that the Full Activation would occur.

While we discussed things, we heard a knock on the door, and an employee dashed into the office, looking flustered.

“I’m sorry to bother you during your meeting, Director General. Our satellite has detected a change in our gravitational pull. It would seem that more dungeons have appeared.”

“Where are they located? How many?” Ishihara asked. “If we don’t know yet, hurry the investigation!”

After listening to Ishihara’s orders, the employee ran off. The director general then stood up and started making calls to several people. I checked my watch. Around an hour and ten minutes had passed since I had entered Osaka Dungeon.

“Will they appear every hour? If things had followed the normal schedule, dungeons should have appeared on April 12, May 18, and June 24. Sixty-six or sixty-seven dungeons have emerged at a time. This means roughly two hundred more dungeons are meant to appear. If every single one of them appears within the next twenty-four hours, we should have eight or nine dungeons appearing each hour.”

Watching Ishihara moving about in a panicked fashion, I tried to resist the urge to bite my nails. I had gotten carried away. I had managed to get to Rank B, gather members, and complete our new headquarters with no particular issues. On top of that, I had found a powerful ally in the Vatican and like-minded comrades in the Crusaders. I had started thinking that, given ten years, clearing every dungeon in the world was completely possible.

“I can’t believe there was a hidden setting like that...” I said, trailing off. “There might be more. What if the Monster Stampede is immediately triggered upon clearing a Rank S dungeon or something like that...?”

Once I started making hypotheses, there’d be no end to it, but it was true that what had happened today needed to become the new basis by which to understand the situation. The Dungeon System was even more vicious than what we had imagined.

“We estimated that there would be seven Rank S dungeons in total. It seems like they are treated differently by the Dungeon System. We should push back clearing the Rank S dungeons as much as we can. Actually, it might be better to start clearing Rank D dungeons first and work our way up...”

Ishihara had come back into the room while I was lost in thought. She sat down in front of me and let out a huge sigh.

“It has been confirmed. A dungeon appeared in Krung Thep, the capital of the Kingdom of Muangtai. We confirmed a reaction in Macao in Sina too. However, the number of reactions we’ve observed is significantly smaller than that of usual apparition waves. New dungeons will likely appear every hour. I’ve already contacted the Kantei to inform the Prime Minister. He also knows that this was caused by you...”

“Now I’m done for,” I said. “How do I apologize to the rest of the world...?”

“Don’t worry. They will discuss this at the Kantei, but they shouldn’t divulge this information to the media. It’s not like revealing this would help the situation in any way, so there’s no point. There’s so much we don’t know about the dungeons. They will probably say that this happened because we managed to clear three of them... At any rate, we should focus on turning this into a good opportunity.”

Ishihara wanted to make use of this sudden wave of appearances and announce that Abyss had also just appeared.

“By some strange and miraculous coincidence, a new dungeon has suddenly appeared right in the courtyard of Dungeon Busters’s new building. Since the JSDF has so much on their plate because of this new wave of appearances, we’ve decided to let the Busters handle this dungeon. You decided to use this as an opportunity to train your newest members...”

“Isn’t that a terrible excuse?” I asked. “This kind of coincidence is quite...”

“Well, it’s actually rather close to the truth, don’t you think? After all, it is true that a dungeon suddenly appeared in your backyard. If it had appeared a few meters farther away, in your neighbor’s garden, Dungeon Busters would never have been born. We wouldn’t know anything about the Monster Stampede or the Full Activation, and we wouldn’t have been able to clear any dungeons. The

creation of the IDOA under the UN was also triggered by Japan's Anti-Dungeon response. It's also the reason for the Urabe administration's newfound popularity," explained Ishihara. "As you see, many miraculous coincidences *did* happen because a dungeon somehow appeared in your yard."

Ishihara spoke as if what she said were only natural, and laughed.

"We absolutely need you to clear dungeons and help the world prevent the Monster Stampede. You are currently the most important person in the world. Isn't it about time you realized your worth?"

Even without Ishihara telling me, I was well aware of how valuable I was. However, that did not mean I could be forgiven. Some might lose their lives because of the subsequent phenomena. Although a court of law would most likely declare me innocent, there was no way I wouldn't feel guilty about everything that happened due to my own actions.

Slap

While I was busy worrying, Ishihara slapped my cheek. I hadn't noticed her standing up and looking down at me with a stern expression on her face. For a B-Ranker like me, an attack of this level didn't feel like much more than a mosquito bite, but for some reason, it helped clear my mind.



“Get a grip! You can’t turn back now. You *will* defeat the dungeons, no matter how many sacrifices have to be made. Isn’t that what you decided? Then hold your head up! What happened this time wasn’t a failure. We got one step closer to understanding the Dungeon System.”

“You’re right. I’ll try to think of it like that. Actually... I’m sorry. And thank you,” I said, expressing my thanks before standing up.

Ishihara was going to say something, but the phone rang before she could open her mouth. I looked at the clock and noticed another hour had passed.

“More dungeons have appeared. Now we know for sure. Full Activation will be upon us in twenty-two more hours. By the way, the call I picked up just now was to report that a dungeon appeared in Nagoya.”

“You’re going to get busier, aren’t you? I’ll go back to headquarters and discuss the situation with my members. Akira and the others had a day off, but I guess the holiday’s over.”

Ishihara nodded, phone receiver still in hand, and immediately started dialing another number. I glanced at her once and teleported myself back home.



[Kantei — Emergency Press Conference]

At six p.m on the evening of April 9, a press conference was held by Prime Minister Urabe at the Kantei.

“Dungeons have been emerging every hour since yesterday at 11 a.m. However, the phenomenon appears to have stopped since the last wave earlier today at 11:08. Of course, we mustn’t jump to conclusions. I ask that our citizens stay calm and avoid disrupting public order. In the event that you find a suspicious stairway leading underground, please do not enter it under any circumstances. Reach out to the police or the fire department immediately.”

After these first few words, the locations of the newly spawned dungeons within Japanese territory were announced.

“We have been able to confirm the appearance of a dungeon in each of the five following locations: Imaike, Chikusa, Nagoya City, Aichi Prefecture;

Hyakunincho, Shinjuku City, Tokyo; Nakasu, Hakata City, Fukuoka Prefecture; Shishibone, Edogawa City, Tokyo; and Tohokucho, Miyakonojo, Miyazaki Prefecture. Including the dungeons that have already been cleared, Japan has seen the appearance of a total of twelve dungeons. Almost six hundred dungeons have been found around the globe since the beginning of the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon. Of course, this number only includes dungeons that have been located. We believe that several dungeons have yet to be found. The international community must cooperate to confirm the positions of every single dungeon.”

Once the Prime Minister finished explaining the general situation, the question and answer session with the journalists started.

“I’m Okabe of the Chuukyou Journal. I would like to ask Mr. Prime Minister a question. Until now, dungeons have appeared in waves every thirty-six days. However, the phenomenon has suddenly accelerated and around two hundred dungeons have appeared across the world. What do you think is the reason for that sudden acceleration?”

“It would not be an exaggeration to say that humankind knows next to nothing about the dungeons. It is true that, up until now, this phenomenon occurred every thirty-six days and that we witnessed a sudden change in this dynamic. If we intend to ponder the cause of this change, I believe we should examine the root of the problem first—that is, the reason dungeons started appearing in the first place. We do not have any proof on this matter and can only offer baseless assumptions and guesses. For this reason, I believe we ought not to lose ourselves in overthinking things we cannot hope to understand.”

“Some of our citizens have started to believe that Dungeon Busters might be responsible for this sudden outbreak of dungeons. According to them, they have angered the dungeons by clearing some of them. What do you make of this?”

“I am afraid I did not know such beliefs had started to spread. However, I would like to remind everyone that Dungeon Busters are clearing dungeons at the request of the Ministry of Defense’s Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau. That is to say, under the orders of the Japanese government. If someone believes that they are responsible for the situation at hand, then the

responsibility falls on our government, who employed them in the first place. Moreover, I would like to ask whether or not there is any piece of evidence supporting the claim that these dungeon appearances have been caused by the clearing of other dungeons. If there is none, this is nothing more than mere speculation. I believe a journalist should know better than to recklessly spread wild rumors in times of crisis.”

Another reporter raised their hand.

“Elections are planned for this year. Will the current events have an impact on the cabinet’s decision to dissolve the parliament shortly?”

Urabe smiled and shook his head.

“Taking measures against the dungeons is indeed one of the biggest challenges of our government. However, this does not mean that we can ignore the rest. We need to take a comprehensive approach and consider not only the economy, diplomatic exchanges, and our national security but also the education of our children when we make decisions. However, I must say the recent dungeon phenomenon has helped me strengthen my beliefs. In fact, I think it is time for our country to modify its constitution. Due to the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon, many dungeons emerged all over the country, but...what if instead of dungeons appearing, monsters had immediately been set loose on our country? How could our Japan Ground Self-Defense Force fight or face them? In order for our forces to protect Japan without fault when the security of our land is threatened, I believe we need to give them an environment in which they can properly do their job. I have realized anew that it is my responsibility as Prime Minister to provide this environment.”

The press conference continued after these words. The Dungeon Busters, the Crusaders, and also the leaders of most countries as well as the IDAO’s Director General; every decision-maker that worked on the dungeon situation followed the live broadcast. They all shared one common piece of knowledge. The first phase of the Dungeon Outbreak Phenomenon was over. Now, the second phase—preventing the Monster Stampede—would start.

Putting it differently, what was about to start was a global race for dungeon resources. After all, there were a finite number of dungeons, so fights over

dungeon ownership couldn't be avoided. At the moment, Japan had gotten a head start but the EU, Sina, and Gamera would not stand idly by. Every single one of these nations saw the dungeon situation as a new frontier that stood before them, waiting to be crossed.

Of course, this was nothing but the willful wishes of the developed countries. There were over seven billion people, and each of them surely had their own vision of what was right or wrong. One's view of what was just would not necessarily be shared by everyone else, and the world's leaders would soon be made aware of that fact...



[The United States of Gamera]

One week had gone by since the Full Activation of the Dungeon System. Because of the sudden apparition of close to two hundred dungeons in only twenty-four hours, the world was in disarray. In the Russian capital, Moscow, a large-scale riot had started. In Gamera, Ronald Howard's popularity was quickly dropping because such a phenomenon had occurred after he had refused to join the IDAO, and his reelection was now being threatened.

Although he had emerged victorious after Super Tuesday in March, Howard hadn't been able to display proper leadership when it came to the dungeon situation that emerged in April. He had been compared to Japan's Prime Minister, Urabe, who had given conferences every hour and many were already mocking him on social media, posting things such as "Ronald Howard? More like Ronald Duck! Stop quacking, start working!" His approval rating had already fallen to about thirty percent.

On the other hand, the prospective Democratic candidates had been taking full advantage of the situation and were extremely active. One of them in particular, a young politician who had recently publicly come out as gay, Peter Wozniak, aged thirty-eight, was garnering attention. After serving in the military, he had been elected mayor of a city a hundred thousand citizens strong at the age of twenty-nine. Against the wishes of his staff, who constantly tried to stop him, he had been entering dungeons and fighting monsters alongside the army.

On Super Tuesday, he gave a speech.

“A few thousand years have passed since humanity came up with the concept of states. From then on, we humans have settled in communities we call countries. We always take this unit as a reference when considering political or economic matters. However, we are now standing on the edge of a turning point in the history of mankind. Dungeons have been appearing in rich and poor countries alike. Even if we manage to get rid of all the dungeons in our territory, what will happen when monsters emerge in countries neighboring our own, such as Kanada, Mejicanos, or South Gamerican countries? Monsters don’t care about race, nationality, gender, wealth, or religion. They look upon all of us as enemies.”

Wozniak continued.

“We can’t fight the dungeons with a mindset of ‘Gamerica first,’ thinking that everything will be fine as long as our country does well. Sadly, many are unable to rid themselves of this way of thinking. President Howard, as well as the rest of the experienced candidates, belong to this group. They have immersed themselves in this doctrine for far too long. In fact, it is their very experience that makes them unable to accept a paradigm shift. When it comes to handling the dungeons, we need to forget the idea of national interest. What we need to consider are the interests of the world as a whole.”

“I am thirty-eight years old, and I have only served as mayor for a mere nine years. But this is exactly why I am the man for the job. I have no ties to the arms industry nor do I involve myself in conflicts of influence between parties. That means I am able to fully focus on the unknown threat posed by the dungeons.”

“Humanity will surely triumph over the dungeons one day,” Wozniak said. “When this happens, we will see a new world form on the horizon. In this world, there will be no Gamerican, no Reichman, no Rushian. The word ‘humanity’ will be enough to encompass us all. I am homosexual, but beyond that, I am simply human. This man is an immigrant lacking permanent legal status, and he is also human. That woman is Muslim. She’s also just human. Let us strive together for a world without frontiers, where humanity is the only thing that defines us.”

Using his youth and his novelty as a weapon, Peter Wozniak was steadily

accumulating supporters. It was already expected that the Democratic National Convention, which was to be held in August, would turn into a close race. If Wozniak continued to gain new supporters at this rate, he would become the youngest president in the history of the United States of Gamera. Gamera citizens were regaining hope thanks to this young and spirited politician after having been completely isolated in their fight against the dungeons due to the Howard Doctrine.



[The United States Department of Defense — Isaac Roland]

I was drowning in work because of the recent successive dungeon outbreaks over twenty-four hours. I had to handle the response as well as plan the future measures we'd need to take. Although, I left most of the work to my secretary, Rebecca, to be honest. My job was to analyze data, build theories, and decide on the best course of action. After all, our seventy-year-old leader didn't understand a thing about dungeons.

"So, could I get your opinion, Doctor Roland? Why did a series of dungeons suddenly appear?"

"Hmm? Isn't it obvious that Mr. Ezo is the cause? The other countries are all dilly-dallying while they're the only ones taking on the dungeons. Since the recent events didn't concern only one dungeon but rather the Dungeon System as a whole, there's a high chance that they triggered it. Or rather, I can't think of any other possibility."

"In that case, should we not investigate the Japanese government to verify this?"

I let out a sigh after hearing the old geezer's words.

"What's the point? It's not like there'd be any evidence. We can't just start a war over suppositions, claiming that they have weapons of mass destruction as we did twenty years ago. Japan is working with the Vatican. This means that the EU as a whole is their de facto ally. On top of that, they've recently made up with the Oriental Republic of Sina. While Gamera was curling in on itself, Japan changed diplomatic relations tremendously in its favor. At this point, no one will listen if Gamera starts complaining about them."

I was a scientist, so I didn't want to involve myself in politics, but the results were clear: the Howard Doctrine was a failure. Gamera had thrown away its allies and shut its doors. Even if there had been some opposition to this move within the country, it was a given our allies would see us as selfish. In a normal situation, the Gamera First ideology might have worked out, but in a situation where the world was faced with a common enemy, acting out and having an attitude of "I'll do whatever I want to fix this however I like. You guys are on your own" wouldn't fly with the other countries.

"President Howard messed up. He should have announced that he'd ditch his Gamera First view during his New Year's Message and yet, he got carried away by his past successes and ended up giving no such speech..."

"Doctor, please don't say any more... This is a government facility."

I nodded and shut my mouth. Although I was a civilian, I couldn't exactly run my mouth as I pleased in the Department of Defense. Maybe I should accept the offer I'd gotten from a private military company. They said they would let me handle everything dungeon-related, so it'd probably be more interesting than staying here...

Oh my. The boss's face suddenly changed color, and he stormed out. Did more dungeons pop up?



[The Crusaders — Rolf Schnabel]

After more or less 750 years, the Crusaders had been resurrected to conduct a "Tenth Crusade" against the dungeons and were receiving a lot of attention from the media. However, I couldn't bring myself to be excited. There was no way I could have after seeing the attitude and resolve of Kazuhiko's Busters with my own two eyes. We had only spent one month together, but the severe and intense training we had undergone inside the dungeons had even managed to change Marco, who used to get carried away easily.

"This thing with dungeons suddenly appearing one after the other... Kazucchi must have something to do with it, right?" Marco asked.

"It's very likely. But it doesn't matter either way. For now, we need to deal

with that thing in front of us,” Alberta answered.

The two of them were chatting behind me as we stood before the entrance of a dungeon. The area had been locked down by the army, and many citizens glanced at us around the blockade with worried expressions. *Don’t worry. The reports say this dungeon is Rank D. We should have no issue clearing it.*

“The Tenth Crusade expedition begins now. Paris’s Champ-Élysée dungeon will be the first dungeon to be cleared in Europe. The road in front of us is long, but I do not doubt that we will succeed in our Reconquista if we work together. Let’s go! Put up our flag!”

I could hear the crowd erupt in cheers and the sound of our Chivalric order flags being raised.



[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

It had been announced that Dungeon Busters would be responsible for handling and clearing the dungeon that had appeared in Shishibone, Edogawa City, Tokyo. The Japanese government had purposefully made the announcement low-key, so the area around the headquarters wasn’t bustling with journalists. Or rather, the journalists must have already been busy enough reporting on the appearance of all the other dungeons.

“The next one’s coming!”

“Aye aye...”

Thanks to N’gie’s barrier, the goblin had become significantly slower. He used Shield Bash and, putting his well-built frame to good use, sent a bunch of goblins flying before they turned into smoke. N’gie appeared quite reliable as I watched him fight like this. It seemed that thinking wasn’t his strong suit, but his defensive prowess more than made up for that. He’d be a good tank.

Name: N’gie

Title: Warhammer Giant

Rank: C

Rarity: Legend Rare

Skills: Shield Mastery (Lvl. 8), Hammer Mastery (Lvl. 8), Guardian Barrier (Lvl. 5)

“All right, let’s head to Floor 5. B-Rank monsters should appear there.”

“Are you sure it is a good idea?” Akane asked. “Akira-san and the others aren’t here.”

Akira and the others had taken the new members to Funabashi Dungeon along with Shifu Liu and Emily. Only Akane, N’gie, and I were currently in Abyss. Since N’gie had reached Rank C, I’d decided to progress to the next floor.

“We will only be checking out Floor 5. Both you and I are Rank B. We won’t level up anymore, no matter how many goblin soldiers we kill. We’ll try fighting a little on Floor 5, and if there aren’t any issues, we’ll aim for Rank A along with Akira and the other members. But first, we need more information.”

Name: Ezoe Kazuhiko

Title: First Contacter, Species Limit Breaker, First Buster

Rank: B

Possession Limit: 219 / ∞

Skills: Card Gacha (23), Recovery Magic, Inducement, Teleportation, Analyze,

After getting to Rank B, I had chosen the skill Analyze. The biggest perk of this skill was that I was able to appraise the skills of not only adventurers but also people who had never set foot inside a dungeon or unlocked their status. I could also appraise items or monsters, of course, but what I was really hoping to do was pick out good prospective adventurers.

“We’ll probably get more Super Rare items if we use Rank B cards too. Then, we’ll be able to give the new members a boost. I won’t overdo it, but if it seems possible, I want to make Floor 5 our hunting ground,” I said before entering Floor 5.

It did not seem all that different from the previous floors. After walking for a while, we came upon a crossroads, and Akane stopped abruptly. Right as I was about to look at her to see why she had stopped, a tremendous pillar of flames, which seemed as if it had come right out of a flamethrower, crossed my line of sight.

“It’s coming. It’s an ancient mage! N’gie, use your barrier at full power!” Akane ordered.

The monster that had just attacked us, a skeleton wearing a hooded coat, came towards the intersection. It held a crystal ball and floated above the ground. It suddenly blasted five consecutive fireballs at us. N’gie, who always had a blank look on his face, clenched his teeth as he held off the blows with his shield. The monster’s attacks were almost the same as Emily’s.

“SHII—”

As it launched its next attack, Akane jumped sideways before kicking the ceiling and swooping down, slashing right at the ancient mage. However, her SR weapon, Kurogasumi, was stopped by an invisible wall.

“Nngh...” Akane panted. “He’s using a physical attack barrier!”

A fireball was heading her way at high speed. I readied my shield and jumped in, blocking the attack before shoving the monster with my shield. The mage leaped backward and immediately unleashed more magic attacks.

“That’s enough! We’re retreating!”

While I fended off the attacks with my shield, we made our way out of Floor 5.

After getting back to the Safety Zone on Floor 1, we decided to take a break and have lunch. Since the government had given us free rein over the dungeon, I had kept the DIY Safety Zone as it was. We took some ingredients out of the Magic Pouch, connected a fryer to some batteries, and started deep-frying our food.

“Yummy... Yum...”

N’gie seemed to enjoy his three-centimeter-thick cuts of tonkatsu. Eating

tonkatsu with its usual sauce was good, but I was more of a miso katsu kind of guy. I had prepared a miso-based sauce and had my tonkatsu along with some rice as a rice bowl. Akane had requested thinner slices, so I had cut hers up twice as thin before deep-frying them.

“It appears that we will really need to pay attention to team composition to take on monsters of Rank B or higher. Challenging Floor 5 is impossible for a team of physical attackers, such as ours. Thanks to Analyze, I should be able to detect magical aptitudes. Looks like I’ll have to put my efforts into headhunting for a while.”

“I think I could probably take this monster on with my ninjutsu,” Akane said.

What Akane had just proposed was not a viable option. There was no point if I was the only one who could go through Floor 5.

“From now on, we need to put together teams with a good balance, like the Crusaders. Several such teams, in fact. We’ll focus on clearing dungeons of Rank A and lower first and leave the Rank S dungeons alone for a while, at least until we have multiple Rank S members in our parties.”

The Dungeon System was extremely vicious. If we cleared a Rank S dungeon recklessly, we could very well shorten the countdown until the Monster Stampede. Even if the rule was that we lost one year each time we cleared an S Rank dungeon, that would already cost us seven years. We needed to keep considering worst-case scenarios such as this while moving forward.

“Our short-term goal will be to create several Rank S parties within two years. Of course, we’ll work on clearing dungeons Rank A and below at the same time. I also want to gather more LR cards while we’re at it.”

Akane nodded. As for N’gie, he seemed to be in agony. Apparently, he had put too much mustard on his dish.



[Ministry of Defense — Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau — Ishihara Yukie]

When I first received the report, I couldn’t believe my eyes. It was impossible. I ordered my men to immediately confirm with the embassy. The report was

about a coup d'état happening in the Republic of Venisuela. Uprisings were frequent in this country, which had been hit by hyperinflation after the disastrous economic policies put forth by a corrupt, communistic, left-wing government. As such, I wouldn't have been all that surprised if this had simply been a coup.

"I can't believe it. Monsters coming out of the dungeons..."

The issue was the way this coup had been carried out. Countless monsters had run rampant in the city, engaging with the police and the army. The central government and parliament had fallen while President Madura was slaughtered along with his whole family.

"If this report is true, it means that a buster controlled the monsters. Ezoe Kazuhiko would never do something as foolish as this. It makes no sense for a Japanese man like himself to go all the way to a poverty-stricken South Gamerican country to start a revolt."

I was certain about one thing. Dungeon Busters wasn't involved. This meant another adventurer that no one had heard of was behind this.

"At any rate, our priority is to gather information. And... Just to make sure, I should discuss this with him. After all, he could easily go back and forth between Japan and Venisuela with his Teleportation skill..."

This was only a pretext. He had told me in the past that people who'd try to prevent the dungeons from being cleared would be more dangerous than the dungeons themselves. His prediction had just come true, hadn't it? Had the supernatural strength of the dungeons finally mixed with man's malice? To be fully honest, I hoped that talking to him would alleviate my worries ever so slightly.

* * *

"This is the very first passport I got when I was 20. I've had three red passports in total over the years. You can check them all. As you can see, I've never been to Venisuela. This means that even if I wanted to Teleport there, I wouldn't be able to," he said immediately.

As always, he was easy to work with. He always gave the most important

information first. One of my staff took his passports and went to another room to check them. They would be comparing them to the list of his travels abroad that we had gotten from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, just to be safe. I didn't think there really was a need to check. After all, a man who had just launched a coup wouldn't be sitting here drinking tea.

"I'm sorry. I do trust you, but..." I trailed off.

"It's okay. You're just doing your job, right? I don't mind at all. By the way, this Earl Grey is really good. Williamson tea?"

"No, it's from Mariage. It's my favorite brand."

The room was filled with a sweet scent somewhat unbecoming of the Ministry of Defense. Without further ado, a worker got out a file. How boorish. I wanted to enjoy our tea party some more. *You won't be popular with the ladies, you know.*

"Ezoe-san, I'm sorry to bother you, but I would like you to look at this picture. It was taken by Gamera's reconnaissance satellites."

He put down his cup and looked at the picture he had been handed.

I asked my secretary to bring us some Nilgiri milk tea. It was important to stay calm when dealing with such things.

"That's an orc, Rank D," he said after thinking for a while. "This one looks like a Rank C monster, a goblin soldier, I think? These goblins also use weapons, but they somehow look a bit different. This one is a hellhound; it's Rank C. I don't know what this ostrich-looking monster is though. There seem to be five different types of monsters, but it's hard to be sure without seeing it more clearly."

"We can't get clearer images due to the resolution of the satellites. The Venisuelian border is currently airtight, and the whereabouts of most of the foreign journalists who were there are unknown. One British journalist who narrowly managed to escape to the neighboring country of Colombia took this picture."

I felt sick looking at the next picture. It showed people getting eaten alive by monsters.

“These are Rank F monsters. Goblins,” he said. “So monsters really *did* make it to the surface...”

Ezoe took out a cigarette as he spoke, probably unconsciously. He appeared to notice and paused, but I got an ashtray out of a drawer.

“I don’t mind if you smoke. I’ll allow it. We can’t be expected to look at such things without a smoke...” I said before also taking out a cigarette.

The Dungeon System was vicious, but in a way, it was also fair. It wouldn’t let out monsters to the surface in one specific area like this. On top of that, the scale in this case was really too small to be called a Monster Stampede. We didn’t know exactly how many monsters there were in total, but I expected that the actual Stampede would have monsters crawling around and filling up the land around us as far as the eye could see. This meant that this incident hadn’t been caused by the Dungeon System, but rather by a human. The most likely possibility was that another buster had used their abilities to summon monsters above ground.

“Venisuela is located in the northern part of South Gameraica, so it’s rather close to the United States of Gameraica. The Gameraican Army might make a move.”

“The IDAO is also discussing possible countermeasures. Colombian and Brezil have requested military support from the UN in order to safeguard their borders. They haven’t gone so far as to specifically ask for Dungeon Busters to come out, but...”

“We can intervene if need be, but I’d want more information beforehand. This has to be the handiwork of a buster. I need to know whether that person is working alone or if we’re facing a group, and whether they’re Rank C or B. We also don’t have a clue why they summoned monsters above ground...”

I sipped my tea and lit my second cigarette. A staff member noticed and handed me an ashtray from god-knows-where. *So there are some in here, huh?*

“The culprit’s goals are unknown. To be fair, I don’t even want to try to understand the mind of someone who does such crazy things. They probably have terrible motives anyway.”

We discussed the situation with the other employees, but as expected, the lack of information made it extremely difficult to decide on a plan of action. Just as the discussions were dying down and we were about to conclude that the best thing to do was to stay put and observe the situation for the time being, a knock sounded, and a young staff member walked in.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Director General, but a man who appears to be the culprit claimed responsibility in a video.”

Ishihara and I exchanged a look and immediately exclaimed the same thing.

“Show us the footage! Now!”

* * *

[Video platform — ???]

“Hello. Greetings to the various heads of state and to every single one of my beloved humans. I am the man behind the fall of the Venisuelan government. This being said, I am not really a man anymore after having achieved the status of Species Limit Breaker, am I?”

On the screen appeared a man wearing clown makeup. He was giving his address in English, so Ishihara translated for me as he spoke.

“Let me offer proof that I am indeed the culprit. Have you ever seen this? This is a card. You can obtain one upon killing a monster. Normally, it’s impossible to materialize this card outside of a dungeon. However, once you clear a dungeon and become a buster, it becomes possible to materialize monster cards outside. Pay attention, all right? Ta-da!”

With a pop, a goblin appeared right next to the man. There was no mistaking it. This man was a buster.

“How was that, ladies and gentlemen? Let me assure you there is nothing up my sleeve! Isn’t it grandiose? AH! I forgot. My name is... Hmm. Please call me Joker, like in that popular Hollywood movie. Actually, since I control monsters, maybe you could call me...Demon King Joker! What d’ya all think?”

The man was laughing while clapping his hands like a maniac. I thought he looked completely insane. After he laughed for a while, the look on Joker’s face

suddenly became serious.

“All right, I hope you now believe that I am indeed the man who made Venisuela collapse. If you’re wondering why I did it... Well, I hated the president’s guts. He preached an equal society yet accepted bribes under the table, trying to be the only one to live in luxury. NOT BEAUTIFUL!!! He could have just been as honest as me and openly said that he would spare pretty girls if they spread their legs.”

He had completely changed his tone and was now insulting the late president with very colorful language. His words were so crude that Ishihara hesitated while translating. He kept denigrating the former president for another minute before letting out a huge sigh.

“Aaaaah. I’m so sorry I keep jumping from topic to topic. Actually, there is a reason I decided to show my face now! I would like to make an announcement to everyone. It’s about an important truth only a handful of people are currently aware of...”

“This guy...”

I reflexively almost stood up. However, the man did not stop, and with his wry mouth, spoke that truth.

“My dear humans, the Monster Stampede will occur in ten years! In ten years... NO MORE WORLD! Old people, young people, men, women... Eeeeeveryone will become monster poop! Your life ends in another ten years! Heh Heh! Ha ha ha ha!!!”

I clenched my fist and bit my lower lip, keeping my eyes glued on the man on the screen, who had started clapping his hands and laughing like a madman again. A red drop ran down my chin.

Chapter 3: Mayhem in South Gameraica

Venisuela was a South Gamerican country with a total area of around nine hundred thousand square kilometers and a population of thirty million. It had plenty of underground resources, such as oil, natural gas, bauxite, iron ore, and nickel, and was even dubbed South Gameraica's richest country in the 1970s. However, the two biggest political parties of the country colluded in secret and, under the pretense of the Puntofijo Pact, dealt a major blow to the country's democracy, immobilizing its ability to purge itself of corruption. As a result, corruption became rampant, and the government fell into a state of deprivation. The economic situation of the country worsened in spite of its tremendous trade profits, and the wealth gap widened.

At the end of the twentieth century, Hugo Chávas, a communist who was also part of the army, took office and conducted structural reforms in a speedy fashion. This came to be known as the Bolivarian Revolution, taken from the name of the South Gamerican hero, Simón Bolívar. His policies included creating a free healthcare system for the poor as well as dividing and redistributing the land of big landowners. Wealthy people and international companies, among others, naturally ended up suffering the strains of these policies. In reaction, the United States of Gameraica tasked the CIA with the mission of orchestrating a coup. It did not succeed, and the Chávas administration endured, becoming increasingly more anti-Gamerican and anticapitalist. Eventually, Chávas decided to strengthen his hold on the media, ignoring the constitution to go through with a third-term election before simply modifying the constitution to remove term limits altogether. The country had started turning into a dictatorship.

In the end, Chávas the revolutionary could triumph over many things but not his illness. By the time the constitution had been revised to allow unlimited reelections, his body was already riddled with cancer. He had tried to better the living conditions of the working class, but he had actually made poverty more widespread and worsened public order in his country by putting forward

antiliberal ideologies and impeding the free market.

After Chávas passed away, Vice President Carlos Madura stepped forward as the new president. He put together a communist government and inherited Chávas's anti-Gamerican and anti-market ideologies. However, a crash in the price of petroleum and his inability to control inflation caused the country to go through a grim economic crisis that propelled the opposing party to a leading position after the elections. Unlike the conservatives, who put a strong emphasis on law and order, the reformist group hoped for a whole new system to be put in place and refused to give up power so easily. Madura then lost two-thirds of the seats in parliament, and surprised everyone by deciding to go through the Supreme Court to restrain the power of the parliament itself. He bestowed legislative power upon the Supreme Court and completely trampled one of the bases of modern governments: the separation of the three powers.

Of course, the Venisuelan parliament called for his impeachment, and protests broke out in Caracas, the country's capital. Parliament appointed its chairman, Nicolai Clyde, as a temporary president, and the G7 countries agreed to recognize Nicolai as president. On the other hand, the Rushian Federation, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and the Kingdom of Ko refused to acknowledge anyone but Madura as the President of Venisuela. The country ended up with two heads of state and fell into an even deeper state of unrest, which only accelerated its decline.



[Republic of Venisuela — Capital City, Caracas]

Bullets flew and the screams of countless people echoed in the streets. Caracas, the capital of Venisuela, had become a living hell where the army, police, and monsters engaged in a three-way fight. A clown was walking amid this hell, humming happily, a blue-haired girl following him.

“Hmm. What a nice view. Superb, superb... Oh my.”

As he strolled along the main street, the clown sighed at a young girl who looked about ten. He danced and pranced, merrily making his way towards her.

“Hello, little girl. Are you lost?” he asked. “This is a bit of a dangerous place, you know.”

“Ah... But... The flowers...” she protested.

The clown tilted his head to get a better view. Inside a little basket were a few bouquets. It appeared the girl had been selling them. The clown narrowed his eyes for an instant before smiling widely once again.

“This is exactly what I needed! You know, Mr. Pierrot has some people he needs to go see, and a present would be such a nice touch! I’ll buy all of your flowers. How much are they?”

“I... Some food...” the girl answered hesitantly.

Due to the hyperinflation, bills weren’t worth much more than scraps of paper in Venisuela nowadays. The clown nodded and started rustling through his pockets. And then...

“TA-DAH! Do you like my magic?”

He took out a baguette that measured nearly one meter as well as some butter wrapped up in aluminum. Picking up the bouquets, he put the butter inside the now-empty little basket before handing the bread to the girl.





[Ministry of Defense — Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

We were watching the video of the clown-looking man calling himself Joker who was thought to be the mastermind behind the unrest in Venisuela. Joker had just casually revealed the time left before the Monster Stampede, then simply continued his speech after laughing for a while.

<Why was the fact that the time limit is ten years hidden by the higher-ups of wealthy countries? Simply because they feared they wouldn't be able to sell their stuff to you if the truth came out. They were afraid their industries would collapse. For the sake of their little benefits, the current peace suits them better. That's how they think, you know?>

“This is bad. Contact Vice Minister Nishida as soon as possible. And the Kantei as well!”

Employees started moving after receiving Ishihara's order. As for me, I kept my mouth shut and stared at the clown.

<I heard that they had a nice therapy session together at the UN and decided to join forces to clear the dungeons. A grand goal. After all, humanity is doomed to end in ten years. Of course, they'd be desperate to do something about it. But stop and think for a second. Even if the dungeons can be cleared... What will the world look like in ten years? What will *your* life be like?>

<What about you, the people of Africa? You have finally managed to put together nations, but Gameraica is still bullying you, those fundamentalists driving you to the brink of extinction. Even though every inch of your suffering was caused by white people, you cannot criticize them to their faces and are forced to struggle and make do with the assistance supplies sent to you.>

<What about you, the poor of Venisuela? You were pulled left and right by the superpowers during the Cold War, and you don't even know what your tomorrow will look like in these troubled times. Will you still be here ten years from now? Can you envision your life then?>

<If things stay as they are, the future we're heading towards is one where a

small portion of rich countries control the dungeons while the rest of the world is forced to act as a magic stone mine for their benefit. The only reason they're so eager to clear the dungeons is because they're looking out for their current interests and trying to expand them however they can. But what about us? We're already poor and suffering. In ten years, we will be just as destitute. Clearing the dungeons will only serve their interests. It won't benefit anyone but them! Why should we, who struggle to even find enough food to fill our stomachs for a single day, cooperate so that these people can keep up their luxurious lifestyles, playing around with hamburger-eating contests and ridiculous gluten-free diets?>

<Humanity is moving in the wrong direction. Our path is grim... So can't we turn the tables on these people who have kept us suffering for years? We need to nationalize the dungeons, and we need to keep the Monster Stampede ON after clearing the last floor of each dungeon. That's it. If we just follow this plan, we can force them to accompany us to hell in ten years. Our situation has only degraded over the years. The time has come to take our revenge after hundreds of years!>

"Freaking destructionist. This isn't a joke!" Ishihara spat out as the video ended.

Her young employees immediately agreed. In the end, Joker's plan was to have everyone die together, the pinnacle of equality and philanthropy.

"If you're so eager to die, go die alone! Don't involve everyone else!" one employee exclaimed.

"We should pressure Gamera and launch an offensive on Venisuela with UN troops. This country is too dangerous," another chimed in.

"We need to get our Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reinforce the unity of the IDAO as well. I don't think any country will take a stand after hearing this, but some may start distrusting us because we hid the timing of the Monster Stampede."

Everyone was throwing around ideas, but it appeared to me that they were trying to calm themselves more than anything else. Now that the timing of the Monster Stampede had been disclosed, the situation of the Urabe

administration would become precarious. Even the international community would start attacking the government, claiming they had been fooled, not to mention the opposition.

“The first thing to do is to contact the prime minister. After all, some of the insane people of the ‘NO URABE’ movement may try to endorse Joker,” Ishihara began before giving out some more orders in rapid succession.

They were right. The Urabe administration would be blamed by the opposition, but I didn’t doubt that most citizens would understand once the situation was explained. After all, publicly announcing that the world was going to end ten years from now was bound to plunge the world into chaos. It wouldn’t be too difficult to convince people and swing public opinion if the Urabe administration said that they thought hiding this piece of information was for the best, at least until all the dungeons had been found and accounted for.

“Ezoe-san, what do you think of the situation after watching this criminal’s speech?” the Director General asked.

I knew exactly what Ishihara expected of me when I saw her expression. There was no point in acting pessimistic now. She wanted me to give her staff a little push.

“Ha ha ha... Happily die together? I didn’t think the Venisuelans had it in them to act like kamikaze.”

I cracked a joke on purpose, trying to lighten the mood before bracing myself.

“Between us, who are trying to save humanity, and Joker, who’s trying to destroy it... Well... I think even a five-year-old would be able to see which side is righteous. Director General Ishihara, everyone, things will surely get tough from now on, but please do your best. If the need arises, I’ll go testify at the Diet as many times as necessary.”

Ishihara nodded and clapped once. All her employees rushed out immediately.

* * *

“So, what do you truly think of the situation?”

Ishihara and I entered her office to discuss things alone now that employees were running around the Bureau frantically. I had tried to stir up the morale of everyone by giving a strong statement completely rejecting Joker earlier, but I had to admit that I was indeed feeling anxious deep down. Ishihara might have sensed it too, because she continued without waiting for a response.

“If this crime had been committed by some lunatic trying to show off, it would have been easier to handle, but...”

“Yeah. He’s trying to make himself sound crazy, but he’s perfectly sane. I don’t know what happened to him, but he surely would have led a quiet life if he had been born in a peaceful country.”

“The fact that he’s sane but rash makes him even more dangerous. He’s serious. I think he gave this a lot of thought before going down this path. He threw everything away to challenge the dungeons, just like you... And he came to this conclusion. This means we won’t be able to convince him to stop. We think that clearing the dungeons and saving humanity is correct, while he thinks that letting the Monster Stampede happen and dooming humanity is the righteous thing to do... There is no way we can ever see eye to eye. He needs to die.”

I let out a sigh and nodded. No matter how many monsters I had to kill in the dungeons, I wouldn’t bat an eye. The same was true for any monster that might slip out of the dungeons. However, Joker was a man, just like me. Killing monsters and killing people were entirely different things. If possible, I wanted to avoid becoming a murderer.

There was no way this man and I would ever manage to understand each other though. I could speak to him. We could discuss our beliefs and exchange our points of view, but we’d never accept the other’s thoughts. There was no common ground to be found.

“There is no absolute justice in this world,” I said. “That’s probably why we’ll never get rid of wars.”

“Several thousand years from now, people will still wage wars. Between men and women. Between neighbors. Between businesses. Between countries...” Ishihara trailed off. “That’s probably just human nature.”

“We will eventually need to confront Joker. When that happens, only someone of the same rank as him or higher can hope to kill him. I’ll be the one to kill that man.”

Ishihara was going to be busy, so we probably wouldn’t see each other for a while. I informed her I would check out the new dungeons that had appeared and dive into Funabashi Dungeon in order to clear it. I made sure to convey my resolve to her before teleporting away.

* * *

In the span of a few days, Joker’s video had spread across the world like wildfire. Journalists swarmed the Dungeon Busters’s headquarters as well.

“Ezoe-san, the man who calls himself Joker has proclaimed that the Monster Stampede will occur in ten years. Is it true?!”

“Since you’ve cleared dungeons in the past, you must know about it! Did you lie to the citizens on purpose?!”

I had a very low opinion of journalists and mass media in general. To me, they were pretty much irredeemable. They didn’t seem to have any self-awareness and did not realize they needed to act as a public institution. They just tried to report any news that looked marketable in an interesting way without a second thought for the damage they caused. On top of that, they immediately hid behind excuses if anyone dared criticize the way they reported on things, invoking “the liberty of the press” or trying to say they had a “duty to society.” They were nothing more than hyenas pretending to work for the good of society.

“If you want to know, how about you dive into a dungeon and check for yourselves? Why do you never report on the situation from inside the dungeons? You claim to be journalists, so you should be prepared to risk your life and aim for the bottom floor, don’t you think?”

I was pissed off by their methods and ended up letting these words escape. Of course, they discussed and criticized this on TV programs.

<The Monster Stampede is an issue that concerns every one of us. It seems that he has some trouble understanding this.>

<He must be in it for the money. Society would be thrown into chaos if the ten-year limit was revealed, just like Joker said. That's why he's not commenting. What greedy behavior.>

The commentators took this opportunity to criticize me to their heart's content. I couldn't think of them as anything but foolish. Even if I were to confirm the ten-year story, how was I supposed to prove it? Maybe I should've just told them it would happen in a hundred years. It wasn't like they'd have any means to know which one was true anyway...

"That's annoying. Now I can't even go for a drink anymore," I said.

"Aniki, you've been standing out too much. It's not a bad thing to lay low for once," Akira answered.

I was complaining to Akira while we had a drink in the cafeteria of the Dungeon Busters's headquarters. This uproar had started right when I was hoping to expand the Busters. It seemed that public opinion on the internet was neatly divided between those who trashed us for keeping the time limit before the Stampede quiet and those who approved of our stance.

"Ezoe-shi, I followed your instructions and haven't tried to meddle with what's happening on the internet at all, but it seems like things are already calming down in Europe. As expected, the Crusaders' influence is huge there."

"They have the church backing them, after all. The Vatican is an important symbol, especially in continental Europe. The pope and the cardinals have certainly been working to calm down their believers."

"As for us, we can't really ask His Majesty the Emperor for help, can we?"

The imperial family never commented on politics in Japan; or rather, they couldn't do so. They were powerful figures who embodied the spirit of the Japanese people and acted as guardians of historical wisdom passed down in the country. That being said, they had meddled with politics in the past, although it had only been a handful of times in the nearly 2,700 years of history that Japan boasted. It might have been disrespectful to expect this, but I kind of hoped they would step forward this time too.

"Here. It's right out of the oven."

Kinouchi Shiori, who had just started working with the Busters, came over with a plate of divine-smelling Margherita pizza she'd made. It might have been due to the time she'd spent making do on an extremely small budget, but she was truly good at cooking. On the other hand, we were never stingy with food expenses here at Dungeon Busters. If anything, she seemed to struggle to completely use up the plentiful budget I gave her. Even the sauce was handmade.

“Ezoe-san, I have good news. Oh, this looks delicious.”

General Manager Mukai brought me a paper. I looked at the expediter and unconsciously raised my eyebrows. It was an invitation from the Director General of the Imperial Household Agency.



[Venisuela — El Rodeo Prison]

“Hell’s Gate” was a Venisuelan prison nicknamed by former President Chávez himself, and it was said that once someone was imprisoned there, they never came out alive again. The guards were virtually absent, with almost everything under the control of gangs. More than five thousand people had “accidentally” died there within a year, while tons of narcotics were being stored in the basement.

“All right! It’s a bit difficult for me to know who’s a prisoner and who isn’t at this point, so come to the courtyard when your name gets called, okay? If you don’t come out, I’ll have my cute little monsters munch on everyone here!”

Monsters surrounded the prison, which was located near the capital, Caracas. Joker was addressing the prisoners using a megaphone, accompanied by gigantic wolves and goblins holding assault rifles. The gang members who stopped at nothing, not even murder, were currently cowering in fear at the sight of the monsters.

Joker called a few names, but they seemed reluctant to come out. He narrowed his eyes and lit a cigarette. Right as he was finishing up his first cigarette, things started getting noisy. A few brawny men came out, dragging along the men whose names Joker had called.

“I’m Simón Claudio. I handle things here. These are the guys you called. One of them’s already dead though. You’re Joker, right? They showed your face on TV.”

“Great! I don’t need to waste time introducing myself. Will you please give me the men behind you?”

“Just checking, but what do you intend to do to them?”

Joker laughed and threw his cigarette butt to the ground.

“These guys raped little girls. I don’t really mind drug dealers, robbers, kidnappers, or murderers, but... I can’t forgive bastards who touch children. I’ll be castrating them. No anesthesia, of course.”

Joker waved his right hand. Howling, the wolves that had been standing by rushed the restrained men and bit off their nether regions simultaneously. Shriill cries echoed around the prison. The rest of the men watched in silence, dumbfounded. The goblins pointed their rifles at the men that had fallen on the ground, thighs bloodied.

“Anyway, you’re all free to go. You’ll be dead in ten years anyway. There are no such things as laws anymore. Steal, rape, and kill all you want, but don’t touch any kid under fifteen. That’s my only rule,” Joker announced on his megaphone.

The criminals seemed to think that they were safe now and gradually approached Joker.

“I don’t have any interest in children, but I’m curious. Why can’t we touch anyone under fifteen?” Simón Claudio asked in a low voice.

“We only have ten years left, so everyone should have fun and live however they like. However, children can’t live how they want on their own. That’s why protecting them and doing what we can to let them smile is the job of us adults.”

“I can’t tell if you’re scary or a nice guy,” Simón whispered after a while, a perplexed expression on his face.

A voice erupted from the crowd.

“Tsk... Why should we obey the rules of this fucker, huh?”

A man holding a thick knife sneered at Joker, as though to provoke him. Joker put on a smile and walked to the man.

“Such vigor! What a promising man!” he said lightly, patting the guy’s shoulder before turning to face the crowd.

The next moment, however, Joker’s right hand had pierced through the man’s chest, pulling out his still-beating heart. Blood dripped from the dumbfounded man’s mouth.

“Too bad you’re an idiot. If you didn’t want to obey, you should have gone for the kill before trying to provoke me.”

Joker crushed the man’s heart in his hand. His eyes rolled back, and he fell to the floor with a thud. Joker got a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his hand as he tilted his head to look at the shivering men in front of him.

“What are you all waiting for? There are no police anymore. Hot girls are getting all wet waiting for someone to thrust right inside, you know? You should go enjoy them. Or do you guys swing the other way?”

The criminals exchanged a look and all ran off at once. Simón held out a lighter to Joker, who had just brought another cigarette to his mouth. Joker glanced at him before accepting the gesture.

“You good? If you don’t go fast, the pretty girls will all be claimed,” he puffed on his cigarette before asking the man who remained unmoving by his side. “There’ll only be leftovers remaining.”

“I already died once. If you don’t mind, I’d rather tag along with you. I wanna see what you’ll be doing next up close. Bring me with you.”

“Do whatever you want. At the very least, you probably won’t get bored.”

The Demon Lord and his retainers slowly walked the streets of Caracas, which had now become a haven for criminals and rapists.



[A Certain Day in April — Akasaka Estate]

The Japanese constitution did not specify who the head of state ought to be. Several systems of government existed, but if you were to limit yourself to modern nations, there were mainly three systems in use—dictatorships, constitutional monarchies, and republics. Further subdividing these three main categories was possible, but typically, Japan was simply classified as a constitutional monarchy.

Many in the country argued about this classification, but in the end, most of their qualms originated with their interpretation of what a head of state was. It was not a very well-known fact, but in Bryten, for instance, the people had no sovereignty. According to their constitution, the king was sovereign by the will of Parliament. As for the citizens, they were but subjects of the crown. Regardless of how state affairs were handled nowadays, this was what the constitution specified.

What about Japan, then? As far as the constitution was concerned, there was no rightful head of state mentioned. In fact, the Japanese constitution stated that the people were sovereign, which made it completely different from the British constitution. The emperor was still brought up, but he was described as a symbol and not the ruler of the nation.

“Aaargh... I’m so stressed,” Mutsuo said.

He was wearing a morning coat and was indeed visibly stressed. Akira and I exchanged a look and let out strained laughs. We were witnessing the historical event of Mutsuo finally becoming a celebrity even though he was a shut-in programmer holed up in some corner of Tokyo six months ago. He was probably the one who felt most out of place at the moment.

“It’s a good thing we took Aniki’s advice and got tailcoats and morning coats tailored in advance,” Akira added. “To think that we’d get invited to a garden party! I have no idea how to act. I’ve only ever seen things like this on TV.”

“Same for me. We got an explanation on manners, but I’m even more stressed than when I need to give a speech at a wedding,” I answered.

Garden parties were held in the spring and fall and took the form of open-air buffet parties. We would be allowed to enter at one o’clock, and His Majesty the Emperor, as well as the members of the imperial household, would make

their appearance at two. Guests would stand in line while the Emperor walked by and exchanged a few words with some of them. After that, we would enter tents and be served different dishes, such as yakitori, sandwiches, and grilled mutton made from the livestock raised by the Imperial agency.

“Please accept my deepest thanks for inviting us today,” Mutsuo said, tripping a little over his words.

He really was way too stressed.

His Majesty the Emperor had just stopped in front of us. Although he had just celebrated his sixtieth birthday, he still had a youthful demeanor.

“You seem to be hard at work. Do you think you will be able to resolve the dungeon crisis?” His Majesty asked.

“Please leave it to us,” I said. “We will make sure to resolve the issue.”

“I have heard that dangerous beings may very well come out of the dungeons in the future. You must have felt great concern for our country, as well as for the world, and decided to keep quiet. It must have been difficult for you, as you were unable to seek advice in such a situation.”

“It was no trouble...”

I felt like I might cry for a second, but I blinked hard and smiled instead. Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress nodded and turned to face Mutsuo and Akira.

“The fate of the world and every one of its inhabitants rests on your shoulders. But still, please do not push yourselves too far.”

“Yes.”

“Y... Yesh...”

Akira and Mutsuo stood stiff as boards as they answered. As soon as their Majesties passed by, Mutsuo deflated on the spot and Akira grabbed his arm to hold him upright, as his legs seemed to have turned to jelly.

The conversation had only lasted a few seconds, but we had been called here for that sake. Thanks to His Majesty the Emperor’s words, the criticism against us was sure to mellow out somewhat.

While we were eating, the Chief Cabinet Secretary discreetly approached.

“Please keep it a secret, but it was His Majesty who decided to invite you today,” he whispered.

He didn’t say anything more, and we didn’t try to probe either. His Majesty had shown his opinion within the bounds the constitution allowed. His words would surely be reported by the media and reach the public. I nodded once and changed the topic.

“It is my first time attending a garden party. I haven’t done anything rude, have I?” I inquired.

“It’s a fine morning coat you have here. Did you have it tailored at Eikokudou in Ginza?” he answered with another question.

“To be honest, it’s my first time wearing it. I wonder when I’ll have a chance to wear it again...” I trailed off.

“One might come sooner than you think.”

We exchanged a smile and the Chief Cabinet Secretary walked away.



[National Diet Building — Budget Committee]

“In his video, the man who calls himself Joker claimed that monsters will come out of the dungeons in ten years. Were you aware of this Mr. Prime Minister? If you were, you have gravely betrayed the trust of our citizens!”

Prime Minister Urabe’s expression was composed, even after hearing the question of the opposition Diet member.

“I have also seen the video of the man who dresses like a clown and calls himself Joker, and I’m aware that monsters took part in the large-scale insurrection that took place in Venisuela at his command. However, I would like to ask you a question of my own too. Will you blindly believe the words of the criminal who caused this chaotic situation? That man did say that the Monster Stampede would happen in ten years, but what proof do we have that it is true? How can members of the Diet trust the words of a single individual on the internet and start questioning me during our Budget Committee meeting

without even a shred of evidence?”

“I am merely suggesting that the government may be aware of the timing of the Monster Stampede and has chosen to conceal it. You know about it, do you not? Was the timing of the Monster Stampede not included in the information passed on to you by Dungeon Busters?”

Joker’s video had caused the Urabe Administration’s approval rating to drop for a time, but it was already showing signs of recovery. After all, it wasn’t as though the fact that this piece of information was known or not changed anything about the situation. The elections were coming up, at any rate, and the opposition was digging for any possible ammunition to lower Urabe’s position. This being said, their prospects didn’t look too good.

“For the sake of argument, let’s assume for a minute that the Japanese government was indeed aware of the timing of the Monster Stampede. Do you think we should have disclosed it? What could have been achieved by disclosing it? Because of one single video from the criminal called Joker, riots and plundering have been happening in Europe, Gameraica, and the Oriental Republic of Sina. This is a piece of information that has the potential to throw society into chaos but does nothing to help us find a solution. The best we can do is ask the civilian adventurers to persevere and do what they can. In such a situation, I believe that disclosing information that would only needlessly cause mayhem is the most irresponsible thing one could do.”

Diet members of the ruling party applauded, and part of the opposition also seemed to reconsider their position. Then, a former entertainer-turned-politician who had a clear stance against nuclear power use and consumption taxes and always advocated for the protection of the constitution made a speech that surprised even the ruling party members.

“Mr. Prime Minister, we are politicians. I believe that our role as such is to solve issues one by one, to strive towards an ideal society. If we ask ourselves what Japan’s biggest issue currently is, I think we could all agree that it is the dungeons. During the previous elections, my position was that the constitution ought to be protected, no matter what. I told my constituents that I would oppose any revision to our constitution, and I still believe that I was right to think so at that time. However, the situation has changed. If revising the

constitution is necessary to take care of the problem we're currently facing, I believe there is no reason to hesitate!"

Several voices erupted from behind him, calling him a traitor and encouraging him to resign at once, but he continued.

"Advocating to protect the current pacifist constitution or being a constitutionalist are good things. However, will this help us defeat the monsters? Will it help us get rid of the dungeons? Of course not. We cannot hope to negotiate with these things. In order to protect our citizens, what we need now isn't words but strength, in the physical sense of the term. For this reason, I am prepared to even consider nuclear weapons being set up in localized areas. Only until the threat of the dungeons is taken care of, of course. What is your stance on this matter, Mr. Prime Minister?"

"First of all, I would like to say that I fully agree with your first statement. Politicians must indeed strive to solve problems one after the other to approach an ideal. Naturally, we are bound to argue over what ideal to strive for and how we understand the realities of our nation, but I believe this is how a democracy ought to be."

"I would now like to answer your question," the Prime Minister continued. "My party has long advocated for a change in the constitution. We wish for the Japan Self-Defense Forces to be given a proper standing in the constitution so that they may proudly accomplish their mission of defending our country. I believe this is my duty as a politician. Regarding nuclear weapons, I think their use needs to be discussed further, but I do not necessarily reject the idea. However, I hope our Diet members are not swayed by emotion. We ought to discuss these matters in a rational and pragmatic fashion. We cannot refuse to consider the idea because we are the only country to have been bombed by nuclear weapons up until now. What we need to consider is whether there really is a need to use such weapons in order to protect our children and grandchildren. If the monsters truly do make it to the surface, will we be able to fight them without nuclear weapons? We must remain lucid and ask ourselves this simple question."

The appearance of the dungeons had caused a shift in the political balance, not only in Japan but also all over the world. Armchair theories and sentimental

arguments were being rejected and everyone was starting to face reality in the face of a supernatural threat.



[Republic of Woori — Seoul Special City]

With Gamera's return to isolationism and Sina and Japan's historical reconciliation during the past six months, the situation in the Far East had changed drastically and suddenly. Usually, the five countries that took charge in the Far East were Japan, the Rushian Federation, the Oriental Republic of Sina, the Kingdom of Ko, and the Republic of Woori. Of this list, Rushi had barely made a move to help handle the dungeon situation in the Far East. The reason behind this decision was simply that no dungeon had emerged in that part of their territory. Only one-third of Rushi's territory was located in the Far East, and although it still represented more than 6.2 million square kilometers, fewer than six million people lived there. The greatest part of the Rushian population lived west of the Ural Mountains, and as such, the country had decided to focus on its cooperation with the EU with regards to the dungeons.

Another of these five powers, the Kingdom of Ko, which operated as an absolute monarchy, was suffering from economic sanctions by the international community on top of that, and had recently become estranged from Sina. Since Japan had no diplomatic relations with them, they were unable to get much information on the number of dungeons that had appeared in their territory or their difficulty beyond what could be learned from satellite intel. For this reason, the three other powers that shared a border with the Kingdom of Ko worried endlessly about how to deal with their dungeons.

Eventually, the Republic of Woori decided to make an attempt at reconciliation with the Kingdom of Ko. Peace talks had already been set up in the past with the help of Gamera, in an attempt to reunify the north and south, but they had ended in failure, and Woori had ended up losing the trust of both Gamera and the Kingdom of Ko. Furthermore, they did not get any information regarding the dungeons from Japan, since the treaty between Woori and Japan—which had included dispositions on military information exchange, mutual aid, and protection—had expired last year. The Woorian ambassador had tried to claim that information pertaining to dungeons could

not be classified as military information and asked for Japan's cooperation. Japan had shut him down, however, putting forward the fact that the JGSDF was in charge of handling the dungeon blockades and nurturing civilian adventurers, which made it military business.

From a domestic economy standpoint, Woori's domestic industry was also going through a rough patch due to a failure to implement an effective wage growth policy. As such, the exports of big electronics companies, such as Samshik Electronics, had taken a hit. The automotive industry was in an extremely difficult situation as well, because the Gamerican and French carmakers had pulled their capital from the country. The youth unemployment rate had reached thirty percent, and President Park Jae-An's approval had hit rock bottom.

"If we manage to reunify the north and the south, we'll be able to enjoy a peacetime economy, and the Republic of Woori will soon surpass Japan in economic power. Our economic policies aren't wrong. We just happen to be at a structural turning point. Didn't Japan also go through a very difficult structural reform some time ago? In order to gain something, we must throw something else away," Park Jae-An declared, holding his head high.

A press conference was currently taking place at the Blue House, but if you took a few steps outside, the streets of Seoul were brimming with protesters calling for the president to step down. More than a million people were demonstrating in Seoul, and some had started clashing with the police. Ironically, the Park administration, which had started in the midst of the Candlelight Demonstrations that had called for the previous leader's impeachment, was welcoming its end because of another series of demonstrations calling for his own impeachment.

"Mr. President, we really need to compromise with Japan. If we continue on this path, we'll end up meeting our demise along with the North," warned a politician.

"What are you saying?! We won't be meeting our demise. We'll reunify with the North and start anew as a brand new country!" a second politician declared.

"Our enemy isn't the North, it's Japan!" another said. "We will not be bowing

to them!”

“Do you intend to ruin our country out of spite?! Even Sina has decided to overturn their anti-Japan policies. They’re putting their efforts towards handling the dungeons. Do you want to throw away our future by focusing on an old grudge?!” asked someone else.

“An old grudge?! The victims of colonization are still suffering today! Our citizens won’t approve until Japan officially recognizes their responsibilities, has their emperor bend a knee and apologize, and pays us reparations from their national budget!”

In the Blue House, a heated debate was taking place to decide the country’s course of action. In spite of the million people demonstrating to impeach Park, the government still had an approval rating of around thirty percent, due to the left wing’s support. They especially supported firm anti-Japan measures. If the president compromised on this point, he might lose the support of the left as well, making him hesitate.

“Shouldn’t we check with Japan whether the timing of the Monster Stampede that was announced in *that* video is true or not? If it’s true, we can use it to criticize Japan. If we don’t get an answer, it’ll at least help us show that the Blue House isn’t staying idle.”

“Let’s agree on that stance as far as Japan is concerned. The problem of our economy remains. Daewin Motors and Samshik are being taken apart because of the tremendous losses they incurred due to dungeons appearing where they planned to relocate their headquarters. If things continue in this way, the automotive industry in our country will be completely destroyed, and we’ll end up with a million people unemployed.”

“We ought to issue government bonds and reduce taxes at the same time. We could also reduce the number of unemployed by putting together a fund meant to train new adventurers. Even if we offer to buy one gram of magic stones for a hundred won, we will still get plenty of candidates, considering the current state of unemployment in the country. We’ll stock the magic stones for now and sell them on the international market once the hydrogen energy technology becomes widespread enough. We can expect great profits. At any

rate, what we really need to do now is somehow create new jobs. We should implement as many policies as we possibly can towards that goal.”

“Let’s also announce our intentions regarding the North. They are putting up a strong front, but they must be getting worried about the dungeons. We will first aim to put together a common reconnaissance team. We should plan for our reconciliation under the guise of working together to solve a common issue, such as the dungeons.”

President Park kept his eyes shut as he listened to the discussions of his aides and ministers. Once a general direction had been agreed upon, he finally opened his eyes and looked at his ministers before clearing his throat. He then proceeded to nod exaggeratedly to signify his agreement.



[Tokyo, Edogawa City — Matsue High School — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

We decided to dive inside Funabashi Dungeon once things calmed down a little. Until then, Dungeon Busters would focus on training the new recruits inside Yokohama Dungeon. Masayoshi, Rinko, Amane, and Hisato were each taking charge of three new members and entering the dungeon alongside them. Just in case, Akira and Shifu Liu accompanied them. We would surely gather new members in the future, and each team would be able to clear dungeons on their own.

As for me, I was currently at Matsue High School to give an explanation of the dungeons to the students, as we expected the bill on dungeons to be adopted by the Diet soon.

“For today’s research time, we invited someone who is quite popular these days! Please welcome Ezoe Kazuhiko-san from Dungeon Busters.”

At Mari’s request, I had agreed to give a speech to her class, second-year group B. This research time was a new subject that had been introduced in high schools last year. Apparently, students had to pick a research topic, and they used this class to present their progress to their classmates. Students hadn’t been able to pick topics related to the dungeons last year, since they had only first appeared in July. The new school year had started in April, however, and many students had decided to research dungeons or adventurers. I assumed

this had influenced the government's choice to seriously consider introducing a high school student apprentice adventurer initiative.

"I'm Ezoe Kazuhiko. I have been avoiding this sort of appearance, but since it was a request from my cute relative, I'll be making a speech to your class today. I'll have her treat me at the school cafeteria to make up for it."

Everyone turned to stare at Mari. I used my Notebook to project a PowerPoint. What a difference from when I was a high schooler. Back in my days, using a blackboard was the norm, but now, it was perfectly natural to present using PowerPoint.

"When you hear the word dungeon, what do you think of? Kiriya-kun."

"Yes. It makes me think of Quick Draft."

He answered with the name of a mobile game, huh? He was probably trying to be funny, as the rest of the class erupted in laughter. I nodded and smiled as well.

"I see. Too bad I'm an old geezer who doesn't play games. That being said, you're not wrong. Dungeons are also about defeating monsters. I'd like someone else to answer too. Azumi-san?"

First, I wanted to check what their perception of dungeons was like. They all seemed to have a pretty clear idea of what the dungeons were like, thanks to the considerable amount of information you could find on the internet.

"It seems like most of you have been able to gather the correct information. There are no levels in dungeons. Just as you would train before taking part in a match or competition, you also have to train your body in order to be effective in a dungeon. You don't get stronger by leveling up. Rather, you get stronger and stronger, and once you pass a certain threshold, you get awarded a rank as proof of that. There's also no such thing as a status window that shows your HP, MP, attack stat, or crit rate. This is the biggest difference between our dungeons and the ones you can find in games or isekai anime."

Moving on to the next slide, I showed a picture of Akira fighting a goblin.

"As you can see, there are creatures that we call monsters in the dungeons. I usually think of them as if they were robots, but they do look like living beings."

For this reason, some people hesitate when trying to kill a monster.”

I switched to a gif of an evil rabbit from Yokohama Dungeon. The girls started fussing over how cute it was, but they gasped and screamed the next moment. The gif had moved on to the part where the cute rabbit’s face turned into that of a terrible yaksha demon.

“To be able to keep working as an adventurer, you must cut out absolutely all emotions in regard to the monsters. If you start thinking they’re cute or pitying them, you’ll be the one getting hurt. And it won’t be a small scratch. They’ll eat you alive. I know it’s easier said than done, so if you’re unable to get rid of your feelings, I recommend trying to fight another type of monster instead. For instance, here is what the monsters of Funabashi dungeon look like.”

As the picture of the centipede appeared, several students yucked in disgust.

“It may seem a bit disgusting, but it isn’t too bad if you think of it as exterminating insects, is it? I think you’d have an easier time killing these over cute rabbits, at the very least. Anyway, what I wanted to tell you is that there are many different types of monsters. They each have their strengths and particularities, and it’s impossible to face every single one of these monsters alone. That’s why adventurers work together in parties.”

Finally, I explained the apprentice adventurer initiative. I had given my opinion to the Diet when they had been drafting the proposal, so I still remembered most of the details. In a nutshell, the idea was to allow Rank D parties that only worked on magic stone mining to recruit minors who were at least sixteen years old as apprentices. These apprentices could make up half of the party at most. Parental approval would be necessary, of course, and they’d have to sign a detailed contract. Finally, apprentices would only be allowed to enter dungeons during weekends and holidays in order to avoid any negative impact on the high schoolers’ studies.

“Since we’re also hosting boot camps in Yokohama dungeon, high schoolers would only be allowed inside on Sundays and holidays. There are other adventurers waiting for their turns, so the time limit would be one hour at a time. However, this still amounts to more or less six days inside the dungeon. That’s already quite the challenge.”

“Any questions?” I finally asked.

A male student raised his hand. I nodded and checked his name on the attendance sheet I had been given.

“Yamaoka-kun, right? Go ahead.”

He stood up and looked me right in the eye.

“What should I do to become an apprentice at Dungeon Busters like Kinouchi-san?”

“Interesting...” I let out unconsciously.

* * *

[Matsue High School — Yamaoka Shingo]

I have had a crush on Kinouchi-san since we were first years. I’ve always had my eye on her. That’s why I knew she had been entering dungeons as an apprentice for sure, and for quite some time at that.

After summer holiday last year, she had suddenly become brighter. She had always been a beauty, but she’d suddenly gained an aura of brilliance. I’d even heard some of our classmates say that she had been scouted by a talent agency, which would have only been natural. To be honest, she was so blindingly beautiful that it was hard for me to believe she was just a high-school student like me.

“We place a great emphasis on the motives of our adventurers at Dungeon Busters. It’s the same for our apprentices. If you’re only interested because you think it looks fun or you’ll get rich quickly, we won’t take you in. That’s because it’s really difficult to keep fighting in the dungeons unless you have a goal bigger than yourself, be it fighting for a person or for a cause.”

Ezoe-san answered my question, but he was still in his professor role and addressed the whole class. Finally, he looked straight at me.

“But if you really want to join the Busters, I’ll see you later. Let me hear your motives.”

He wrapped up the topic and started taking other questions. I sat down again and suddenly felt someone’s gaze on me. My heart started beating incredibly

loud when I realized Kinouchi-san was looking at me.

* * *

[Ezoe Kazuhiko]

“I want to become strong enough to protect Kinouchi-san. That’s my motivation.”

I had borrowed a classroom over the lunch break to listen to what Yamaoka Shingo-kun had to say. His reasoning was exactly what I’d expected. He had a crush on Mari. Although she still looked like a high school kid, it was indeed easy to see that she was one of the prettiest girls her age. Even during my lecture, I thought Mari really stood out among the other kids in her class. I expected he wasn’t the only boy who had fallen for her.

“So you’re in love with Mari, huh? Have you confessed?” I asked.

“Well... I...”

“You’ve only been watching her from afar, haven’t you? She won’t fall for you if you keep this up. You have to go for it in earnest.”

“But... A guy like me...”

Ah, youth... I thought before shrugging. He was so scared of getting rejected that he didn’t dare make a move. In the end, he wouldn’t say a thing until he and Mari inevitably drifted apart, the perfect example of an unpopular guy. The first step to becoming popular was to actually *do* something. A guy who couldn’t bring himself to say, “I love you. Please date me!” would never, ever be popular, no matter how long he waited.

“Let me give you some advice as an older guy who has dated quite a few women, since you seem to have the wrong idea about these things. Most men think you should confess after the other person has fallen for you so that you can start dating. We tend to fall in love at first sight with pretty girls, after all, so we assume girls must feel the same. Well, they don’t. Girls don’t fall in love and then start dating someone. They fall in love *while* dating someone.”

“But so many guys have confessed to Kinouchi-san, and she’s rejected them all. Even if I were to confess, she wouldn’t...”

“That’s likely. Mari doesn’t judge men based on their appearance. I mean, think about it. Who does she see on a daily basis? Beside me, she’s constantly around Shishido Akira, the world’s strongest fighter, and many other men. Obviously, none of them are scrawny high schoolers still clinging to their mother’s skirts. They’re heroes, putting their lives on the line to stand up to the dungeons. It’s only natural she wouldn’t be attracted to people who live casual lives out of harm’s way.”

“Then, what should I do? If you were in my shoes, Ezo-san, what would you do?”

I laughed to myself. Asking a guy over forty for love advice was really something. I still fooled around with women on occasion, but I hadn’t actually been in love for more than a decade. Instead, I decided, as the leader of Dungeon Busters, to set a condition for him.

“Confess to Mari. And you can’t just say it in passing. You have to go all out in declaring your love. Get rejected once, and come back to see me. It won’t kill you. Either way, don’t even think about fighting monsters if you’re too much of a coward to do that.”

I stood up and looked down upon the inexperienced boy. He looked as though he might burst into tears. Was it really so hard?

“If you confess properly, I’ll let you join the Busters as an apprentice. You can build up your strength in the dungeons. You’re gonna become a strong man who can protect Mari, right? If she sees you doing your best, she may just change her mind.”

He seemed to hesitate but finally nodded. He looked a little more like a man now.



[Chiba Prefecture — Funabashi City]

Chiba City was the capital of Chiba prefecture, but if you asked locals which city was the center of the prefecture’s economy, they’d doubtlessly say Funabashi City. It was the biggest city with a population of over six hundred thousand inhabitants and it boasted successful agriculture and fishing sectors

while also being an important spot for both heavy and light industries. It was also home to one of the largest locations of a very well-known Swedish furniture company. Primary, secondary, and tertiary economy sectors were all represented in Funabashi City, which was situated only thirty minutes away from Tokyo Station, making it an extremely popular location for families to settle.

Japan's particularity was to have as many local specialties as it had cities. Of course, ramen would be the specialty of one of the leading cities in the Kanto area.

"Aniki... This is yakisoba, right?" Akira asked after a long pause.

"No, it's ramen. This is one of Funabashi's popular dishes, Worcestershire sauce ramen."

This dish originated in a local mahjong parlor around half a century ago when the owner had decided that serving yakisoba and soup on two different plates was too much of a hassle and mixed them together. You could taste the unique spiciness of the sauce, and it blended really well with the taste of the fried ham that was served alongside it in lieu of the usual chashu.

"But it has stir-fried vegetables, nori, and even minced red ginger? Calling it yakisoba soup would make much more sense, wouldn't it?"

"Whatever. Just eat. It's not like there's a precise recipe for ramen anyway. If the chef says it's ramen, then it's ramen."

The soup had the very distinctive taste of the sauce and was served along with cabbage, red ginger, and fried ham. As expected of a popular commoner dish, it somewhat tasted like junk food, which would make you crave it from time to time. Akira was a bit hesitant after first tasting it, but he was now stuffing himself. Of course, one bowl wouldn't cut it. We decided to go to another shop to finish filling up our stomachs.

"All right, let's go have some suzuki-meshi next."

Chiba Prefecture was second to none when it came to fishing for suzuki—Japanese sea bass. The season for fishing winking suzuki, the most acclaimed local species, started at the end of April. They were used to make dashi that rice

would be cooked in before being made into croquettes. This specific way of cooking it was called suzuki-meshi, and over thirty establishments in Funabashi served these croquettes, incorporating them into different dishes.

“Humans have a habit of overlooking what’s right in front of them. The people of Tokyo fuss over Hokkaido, Hokuriku, or Kyuushuu’s specialties, but they barely know anything about the local specialties of the Kanto area, let alone Funabashi, even though the city’s only thirty minutes away. The same goes for pears. Most people would immediately think of Nagano but little do they know that the number one producer of pears in Japan is actually Chiba. Funabashi’s are especially renowned for their quality. They’re really easy to find, but most people have never even tasted them for some reason.”

We walked into an izakaya and ordered fried suzuki-meshi with herbs, steamed clam, namerou, carrot sticks enriched with beta carotene, and Japanese mustard spinach highballs. All of these were Funabashi City specialties. Akira was a little bit taken aback after seeing the spinach-colored highball but pleasantly surprised after taking a sip. The taste of the Veronese green beverage was way lighter than expected.

“By the way, I heard a new high schooler would be joining us. He’s called Shingo-kun, right? He sure has guts, joining us after being turned down by Mari-chan.”

“He said he’d become strong to protect the girl he likes. That’s a good enough reason to fight. Mari is already in her second year of high school. She’ll turn seventeen this year. It’s healthy for high schoolers to experience love a few times, right?”

“Aniki, you’re acting like her father! I guess Mari-chan is becoming an adult too. And you’re becoming an old man...”

“Shut up. I’m only forty. There are still three months left before my birthday.”

We had a toast with our glasses full of green liquid.



[The United States Department of Defense — Isaac Roland]

There was only one thing that kept me sitting in this seat instead of giving up

my role as a Command Chief and joining a civilian research team focusing on the dungeons. I was currently drowning in work because of the huge blunder of a certain country located in South Gamera, the Republic of Venisuela, which had let some self-proclaimed Demon King emerge.

“From what the FBI has been able to gather, Joker is a white man aged thirty to forty. He went to university and perhaps even to graduate school, so he is pretty educated. They think he might have been doing volunteer work for the poor or working as a doctor in Venisuela.”

“You’re saying a person like him became a buster after clearing a dungeon and then went as far as starting a coup? Why would he do that? Either way, what did the president say?” Roland asked.

“He intends to observe the situation for now. Between the criticism from the international community over the withdrawal of our troops, Japan and the Vatican actively clearing dungeons, the fact that our government was unable to figure out the timing of the Stampede, and finally, the worries about what may happen in ten years that have even led to riots... If another issue were to arise, the president can say goodbye to any hope of being reelected. Hell, he won’t even be selected as the Republican candidate in August. He may become the first sitting president in Gamerican history to fail to be nominated by his own party.”

“On top of that, the situation in Japan, the country at fault for hiding the news, calmed down before ours. To think that there weren’t even any demonstrations there...”

“The Japanese are used to disasters. They don’t make a fuss over things that can’t be changed. Dungeon Busters’s influence also played a big part. They’ve already cleared three dungeons and are planning to take on another one soon. Their civilian adventurer system is also working wonders. They already have more than two hundred people in charge of mining magic stones. Prime Minister Urabe even announced that he intended to have every single dungeon within their territory cleared while he was in office.”

“Thanks to this, the Urabe administration’s popularity has recovered to around fifty percent. On the other hand, President Howard is now at around

twenty percent approval... His approval rating has dropped a lot in the past four months.”

My subordinates all let out a sigh. The mood was heavy in the conference room. Regardless, I didn’t really care about either Prime Minister Urabe or President Howard. I was far more interested in Joker, so I brought up the topic again.

“Enough political talk. Our job is to handle the terrorist that popped up in Gamera’s backyard—or should I say, South Gamera. Show me the Joker video again.”

My secretary fiddled with her computer for a bit, and Joker’s video was projected in the room. I crossed my arms behind my back and focused on the footage. As expected, I still wondered about some things. How did he shoot this?

“Don’t you think it’s weird? From what we can see in this video, Joker seems to be quite the crazy guy. Would someone like him take the time to set up a tripod and microphone, make a speech, and then proceed to edit and encode the footage before uploading it online?”

“You mean to say that he has an accomplice?”

“Several, actually. I don’t think he overthrew the government on his own either. I don’t know if he’s part of it or its leader altogether, but I think there is an organization behind him. It’s true that the situation in Venisuela was unstable from the get-go, but it’s a country of over thirty million people. It wouldn’t be surprising if some destitute citizens looked up to him.”

I leaned forward and crossed my arms on the desk before looking around at my subordinates.

“Let’s remember one fact. The first team to ever clear a dungeon was comprised of three people. Even for Dungeon Busters, clearing dungeons solo was impossible. This means that Joker probably didn’t lose his mind while becoming a buster on his own. He had allies who helped him clear the dungeon from the very start. Considering the economic collapse in Venisuela, it’s unthinkable that gathering magic stones would bring in any money. But then, why did he enter a dungeon in the first place?”

I contemplated the situation as I explained my doubts to the others. I tried putting myself in Joker's place. It was unlikely that he had entered a dungeon out of curiosity. People only start getting curious when their basic needs are covered, which wasn't the case in Venisuela. With the slums getting bigger and bigger and more people than ever struggling to feed themselves, it was hard to imagine that anyone would bother with something that couldn't immediately be eaten, like magic stones. Joker must have entered a dungeon out of necessity. But what did he need? What could he have gained in the dungeon?

He must have gathered something else. Monster cards? Potions? Weapons or magic items...?

None of these seemed to be the right answer. He might have decided to seek medicine if he was a doctor, but he'd only need that because of his job. His teammates wouldn't have agreed... It must have been something that both Joker *and* his teammates needed...

"Unless..."

I reached one hypothesis. Our assumption that the monsters only dropped magic stones may very well have been wrong from the very start.

"Are there any dungeons that drop rewards other than magic stones in Venisuela?" I finally asked after a moment.



[Venisuela — Capital City, Caracas]

Caracas was the biggest city in Venisuela, renowned as the most dangerous city in the entire world. Murders and burglaries in particular happened almost every day in the slum of La Charneca. It was hell on earth, a place where people would fight to the death for a slice of bread.

"Boss, here's today's harvest."

A man with a short beard entered a disorderly room situated in an unassuming corner of the slum. Several bowls filled to the brim with either a white powder or fruits were carried inside. However, the clown that the man had just called boss paid absolutely no mind to the bowls and directed his attention to the stack of cards handed to him.

“Distribute it all. Give priority to families with children. Oh, and... I got my hands on some military equipment, so it’s time to increase the number of harvesters,” the clown instructed, glancing at the newly formed stack of bowls.

“But Boss, you haven’t eaten anything today. You should at least eat this...”

Joker accepted the apple that was given to him and took a bite. The dungeon that had appeared in the slum of Caracas did not drop magic stones but food. Joker, the man who had cleared this dungeon, had decided to leave its management and harvesting in the hands of the slum’s inhabitants. He only took the cards. While the amount of food that could be harvested wasn’t much compared to the sheer number of people here, they could at least get enough to survive. In the slums, many children did not even know the taste of meat or butter.

The bearded man watched Joker eat his apple as he reminisced about how impressed he had been by this person. Joker was a scary guy who could easily twist someone’s neck with his bare hands, but at the same time, he had strong ideals and lived by them.

Humans were not equal from birth. In some countries, people could easily throw away literal tons of food while in others, they suffered the pain of starvation. Some mothers could not even produce enough milk to feed their newborn babies due to malnutrition. Who would believe bullshit like everyone being equal in the eyes of God?

“God dealt us a shitty hand. For the rich to stay rich, there need to be poor people too. They need clowns to be able to keep living happily. That’s what we are. Clowns. That’s why I’ll purge this world as Joker. When the world is finally purged, we’ll probably be dead too. But it won’t be a meaningless death. Let’s die laughing as we witness this twisted world ending...”

The bearded man felt as though he had finally found a reason to live. Up until now, he had had no purpose and had lived a life led by anger, hurting countless people as well as himself in the process. He had no good reason to be alive. Whether he was alive or dead had no impact whatsoever on the rest of the world. He hurt and was hurt, stole and was stolen from, and thought he’d eventually die just like that, utterly bored.

But he had changed. He was now on board with Joker's crazy dream. Why not go mad alongside him and join his crazy dance? He'd follow Joker until his worthless life or the world itself ended...



[Shishibone Dungeon — Yamaoka Shingo]

After becoming an apprentice at Dungeon Busters, I learned the truth. The first-ever dungeon had appeared in Shishibone, and Ezo-san had been diving into this dungeon since last June. Kinouchi-san had also started helping him during the summer holiday. This meant that Enhancement Element had triggered Kinouchi-san's sudden change...

"Ha... Ha..."

I was dripping with sweat. I had been told to walk while wearing weights on my arms and legs, but I hadn't thought it would end up being so hard. I heard that Kinouchi-san had also started out the same way.

"Hurry up. Mari is bored."

"Emily-chan, don't be so mean. It's Shingo-kun's first time in a dungeon," Mari said.

I was shocked by something else after entering the dungeon. Kinouchi-san materialized a girl she called Emily, who seemed to be around our age. She looked tough, but just like Kinouchi-san, she was really beautiful and cute. If they went out together above ground, plenty of guys would surely chase after them. This being said, a single thought won over all others when it came to these two...

Damn... I can't fall behind two girls. So lame!!!

I was struggling to walk straight, but the two of them were totally unfazed. Their endurance was at a whole other level. Frustration welled up from deep within me. Why had I even dared say I would protect Kinouchi-san? She was clearly the one protecting me at the moment.

"Mari, you can't show pity at times like this. If you pity him, he'll feel even worse, won't he? And you. Get up! You're a man, aren't you? You want to stay

here and get gobbled down by some goblins?”

I gritted my teeth and tried to redirect all my strength to my thighs. I pushed forward, slowly but steadily. I would get stronger with every step. I had to believe that and keep on walking. I braced myself and moved forward, almost dragging along my legs in the process.

“We’re done. Good work!”

“Tha... Thanks...”

Kinouchi-san gave me a Potion. It was as red as blood but didn’t smell or taste like anything. As soon as I drank it, my body, which had been on the verge of collapse, felt much better. I didn’t feel any pain anymore. This being said, it did not help me recover my mental strength. I slumped down on my bed and fell asleep right away.

“So, Mari... Don’t you have something to tell me?”

“To tell you?”

“Don’t play dumb. Shingo confessed to you, didn’t he?”

“Yeah... I refused and told him I didn’t intend to go out with anyone for the time being, but I didn’t expect he would join Dungeon Busters... I’m sure Kazu-san is planning something!”

“Oh my! ‘For the time being?’ Does that mean you may date him in the future? I mean, he’s pretty cute.”

“Stop it!”

I was fast asleep, completely unaware that such a conversation was taking place.



* * *

[Funabashi Dungeon]

“Ninja Arts, Homuranagi.”

Akane unleashed her ninjutsu, and flames spread out, covering almost the entirety of the flooring. The centipedes on Floor 1 disappeared one after the other. This skill wasn't very powerful, so it wasn't all that effective on lone targets, but it could be used as a zone attack. It was more than enough to deal with monsters up to Rank D.

“Anego, you're starting to look like a game character! I'll handle Floor 2, okay?” Akira said.

The centipedes were decimated in a matter of minutes. It was as easy as doing pest control. As we stepped inside Floor 2, the monsters waiting for us were huge flies that measured around sixty centimeters. As expected, I had been right to avoid bringing the girls here. If Mari had been here, she might have passed out at the sight.

“These are monster flies,” Akane explained. “They're basically big flies with the capacity to use weak poisons and dissolve things using their secretions, but they're rather fast.”

She also seemed grossed out. Well... I guess it was only logical that huge insects with plenty of eyes would come out in such a dungeon. Perhaps we'd even end up coming face-to-face with the mutant insects from the Toxic Jungle that had appeared in a famous movie.

“Leave it to me,” Akira said.

He readied the new SR weapon—a nunchaku—he had acquired.

Name: Lee's Nunchaku

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: This nunchaku can only be used by martial artists. The wielder will not feel its weight, but it will deal as much damage as an iron ball of a hundred kilograms when hitting an enemy. The chain is made of adamantite

and is almost impossible to destroy.

“Yaaaaaah!”

Akira swirled around his nunchaku at high speed, just like the heroes of the kung fu movies that used to be extremely popular fifty years ago would. After a while he yelled “Waachaaa!” and struck down a fly that came flying towards him. His movements became faster and faster until I wasn’t even able to see his arms anymore, the flies within a two-meter radius turning to smoke one after the other. Just watching him fight was enough to imagine the whole “dragon music” soundtrack.

We moved on to Floor 3 to find Rank D monsters. Mosquitoes.

“These are Rank D monsters, evil mosquitoes,” Akane told us.

“I’ll take care of them,” I answered.

I stretched both of my arms in front of me and assessed my range. Then, I proceeded to strike down every mosquito that entered it. I didn’t try to follow their movements with my eyes or calculate their trajectories. I just struck, bringing the palm of my hand wherever I felt it was needed.

“Now that I think about it, some famous kung fu movie actor did say, ‘Don’t think, feel,’ right?”

“My favorite movie quote is more along the lines of, ‘Learn the rules, practice them, and forget them. When you throw away the form, then you shall master all forms.’”

Four big mosquitoes approached me at once. I killed them all at once, and we kept moving forward. We made it through Floor 5 just as easily, but when we entered the Safety Zone on Floor 6, Akane and Akira jumped back suddenly. That’s when I noticed a black-haired woman who looked to be in her midtwenties standing in the Safety Zone.

“Hello! I’m a peddler who travels through the dungeons. Nice to meet you. Ni hi hi!”

As it seemed, there was still plenty we didn’t understand about the Dungeon System.

[Funabashi Dungeon — Floor 6]

“You’re a peddler who travels the dungeons?”

The black-haired lady sitting casually in the Safety Zone of Floor 6 introduced herself as Rita the Peddler. She had both Japanese and Western features, and at first glance, you couldn’t tell whether she was Japanese or a foreigner. Either way, I found it difficult to believe that another adventurer would be here. I hoped Akane would be able to give me an explanation.

“Since the Dungeon System has been activated, I expected we would bump into her eventually,” Akane said. “Kazuhiko-sama, you’ve acquired many monster cards up until now. The peddler’s job is to exchange these cards for different items. This being said, you may not require this, since you and the others already have the Gacha skill...”

“That’s for sure! A Card Gacha! I was so surprised when I heard about this. In the previous worlds, exchanging cards was the sole privilege of the peddler. You’re going to put me out of business with a skill like that!” Rita the Peddler said, complaining about her situation while wearing a big smile on her face.

She didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“You said your name was Rita, right? We do indeed have a large number of cards, but we can use them to activate the Card Gacha and obtain items and equipment. If you just want to exchange cards, I doubt it’ll end up being a good trade for us.”

“Ni hi! That all depends on the way we trade. For example...”

Rita took out a Legend Rare card. My eyes instinctively went to the card as Rita waved it in front of me and cackled.

“Ni hi hi hi! I knew it! Your Gacha skill doesn’t allow you to pick the cards you want, does it? Judging from your reaction, LR cards must not come out often. Are you interested now?”

“Let’s hear it. What kind of trade do you want with us?”

The raven-haired peddler was flat as a board, but did have a pretty face. If she

were to walk around in Shibuya or Harajuku, she would most likely attract quite a few men. However, the way she cackled with her hand in front of her mouth made her look like a shady merchant from head to toe. Couldn't the Dungeon System have created a better character?

"I only sell high-quality items! I won't offer anything but SR, UR, and LR cards. On top of that, you may choose the cards that you want to purchase. For a hundred R cards, I'll give you one SR card. For a hundred SR Cards, one UR card. You can guess the exchange rate for the LR cards, right? As you can see, you can have one card of your choice of the upper rank if you're prepared to give up a hundred cards!"

"I see," I said after thinking for a while. "You're pretty good at doing business. With a hundred cards, I can roll the Gacha eleven times. Of course, that doesn't mean I'll get the cards I'm looking for. If I can obtain the cards I want for sure, trading with you might be worth it... Don't you think you're a bit too greedy, though, asking for a hundred cards?"

"Ni hi hi! That's how business works! I prepare cards of the finest quality to make it worth your while, of course. For instance... Mr. Martial Artist, there! What do you think about this card?"

Name: Kaioh Godly Robe

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: Fighting clothes woven by fairies and infused with their magic. Besides providing a high defense boost, these robes grant the wearer a special ability: Kaioh-ken. The wearer may temporarily raise their attack to ten times its usual value.

"Wait, I love this manga! I kinda want it," Akira said.

"You do, right? Chatting with customers and recommending cards they might like is the most important part of our job. Isn't this more valuable than that Gacha thing, from which you never know what you're going to get?"

"You're not wrong. But this isn't enough. I want you to do something else for me."

I narrowed my eyes and looked down at the peddler who was still lining up cards on the floor. Rita assumed a weird position and acted as though she was protecting her body.

“Wha...? What do you want? I can’t do that! I’m not such an easy woman. Wait... I’m still a peddler before anything else, so if you really want to... I will accept for a hundred UR cards... But only once...”

“You seem to be getting the wrong idea. Your body isn’t even worth one Common Card,” I retorted. “I want to ask you something else entirely.”

“So mean! That’s not something you should tell a maiden!!!”

I ignored her yelping and crouched down in front of her. She had said something that stuck with me. “Traveling the dungeons.” This meant she knew about the other dungeons...and about the other adventurers.

“I want information. Have you traded with someone else? To be precise, I want to know if you’ve come in contact with a man who calls himself Joker.”

The peddler’s expression didn’t falter one bit as she looked straight at me. A chill ran down my spine as I looked into her eyes. We had been talking casually until now, but my gut told me the woman in front of me was the furthest thing from a human.



[Venisuela — Temporary President Nicolai Clyde]

I had started devoting myself to political action when I was still a student. After graduating from a university in Caracas, I pursued a master’s degree overseas. During that time, my mentor in the political world, Leonardo Menduza, and I created a party to save our motherland, Venisuela, from far-left totalitarianism. We fought to bring back democracy to the country. Of course, the government retaliated, and Leonardo, our party’s leader, was arrested for opposing the regime, while I had to fend off several attempts on my life.

The last presidential election had been a sham. Madura had been reelected by using underhanded tactics that a democratic leader should never employ, such as refusing to provide food relief to the people who would not vote for him. *Getting rid of wealth inequality? Rising against the monopolies? Don’t*

make me laugh. In the end, the only thing that guy wanted was to preserve his spot at the top so that he could enjoy living in luxury. This was the reality of communism.

My partners and I pleaded with the international community to get it to consider this sham of an election void. As a result, some countries, such as Gamera and Japan, accepted and recognized me as temporary president. As our leader, Leonardo should have been the one to take on this role, but as he was under house arrest, I had no choice but to replace him in that position of leadership.

We had intended to quickly liberate Madura's political opponents once he had been deposed. Then, we'd organize an election and have Leonardo spearhead our campaign. At only thirty-seven, I wasn't fit to pull our country out of the depths it had fallen into.

However, our hopes had been trampled upon. Monsters had suddenly appeared by the dozen, infesting the capital and massacring every government official they could find, including Madura. On top of that, they fought our army and attacked our prisons, letting out hundreds of criminals. At this point, I could only witness the destruction of my beloved country.

"What do you intend to do to me?" I asked.

My family and I had managed to escape to my hometown, located in Vargas, in the north of the country, but the monsters had eventually reached this town too. My supporters had tried to help me escape farther away, but the ringleader behind the current coup had used a TV program to relay his hopes to talk with me. As a result, I was now facing the man in a clown costume, Joker, with my wife and my daughter standing by my side. My daughter was so scared she clung to my arm with all her strength.

"I don't intend to do anything at all. You're different from Madura. He's all talk, but I think you truly have a vision. You're serious about wanting to save this country, right?"

"Of course. You, on the other hand, ruined our country. The political organs can't function while criminals roam free in the streets. The people live in fear! What are you trying to achieve?! Will you only be satisfied when Venisuela

falls?!”

“Hya ha ha ha ha!!!” Joker let out a shrill laugh.

My daughter screamed in fear and held me tighter. Joker noticed and schooled his expression, a serious look immediately appearing on his face.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, young lady. I’m sorry. Would you like to see a little sleight of hand?” he apologized.

He took out an empty bottle of cola from his jacket pocket and set it on the desk. He hid the bottle with a red handkerchief, and when he removed it, the bottle was fully filled with cola. It appeared to be fully sealed. He pressed on the metal cap with one finger, and it popped open at once.

“Here you go. I’ll give you this, so be good, and go wait in the next room with your mother. I need to have a serious talk with your daddy,” he said with a wink, handing the bottle to my daughter.

My wife took it instead, tugging our daughter along to the next room. As for me, I was left unable to understand anything about the man facing me. I heard he had had Madura thrown to the dogs to be eaten alive. Even if that man had been nothing but a dictator, I couldn’t agree with this. He should have been judged in a court of law.

Joker was a heinous demon king, but he also seemed to have some humanity left. I couldn’t comprehend what was going through his mind.

He took out another bottle of cola and started chugging it down, one big gulp after the other. The bottle was empty in a matter of seconds, and he burped loudly before crossing his legs and lighting a cigarette.

“What were we talking about again? Ah, right! My goals. Well, it’s nothing complicated. I’m just thinking of destroying humanity. No biggie.”

“What the...?”

I didn’t get it. I knew this man was insane, but his insanity ran so deep that my brain couldn’t follow.

“You know, people just never care about anything that doesn’t directly affect them,” he puffed at his cigarette and explained. “They don’t care if someone’s

unemployed or starving. Even the activists who try to remedy these issues only do it for the sake of money or because they get drunk on some feeling of superiority, pretending to be saints. You're just like that. You became a politician for your own sake, not Venisuela's."

"You're wrong! I just couldn't bear to watch my beloved motherland sink any further! I couldn't stand the sight of that dictator destroying our country as he liked while throwing fake promises to the population! There's not an ounce of selfish interest in this!"

"My, of course there is. You just said it. *You* couldn't bear to watch. *You* couldn't stand it. That's what prompted you to act. Your personal feelings. Isn't that a perfectly selfish motive? Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to blame you. That's just how humans are. Acting out of interest is completely natural. Madura did what he did to protect himself and live in luxury. You acted based on your anger at his actions. If Madura's motive can be summed up as greed, yours can be summed up as conviction. There isn't a good or bad answer here. It's just a matter of personal taste."

I just couldn't read this man. I had taken him for a lunatic, but his last words were full of wisdom. Somehow, it just made him all the more frightening.

"The dungeons are an issue that concerns humanity as a whole, but they're not scary enough. I mean, we've already had to tackle common issues in the past, right? Global warming or environmental destruction, for instance. But the masses' imagination is too weak. If the issue isn't apparent or specific enough, they can't seem to understand that it concerns them too. This is why I want to make sure that every single person realizes that the dungeons are, in fact, their problem. I want everyone, especially the citizens of advanced countries, to come face-to-face with the prospect of inexorable doom."

"Why? Why would you want to do this?" I asked.

Joker took out a second cigarette and exhaled smoke towards the ceiling.

"Same as you. I couldn't stomach the hypocrisy of this world any longer. Rich Gamerican bastards riding luxury cars to conferences where they discuss CO2 reduction before going out to discuss moving their factories to Sina or Southeast Asia around a glass of crazy expensive, three-thousand-dollars-a-

bottle champagne. They know that to gouge out more wealth they need to keep the poor in poverty. If they want to take out a big chunk of our limited resources, they need to make sure only scraps are given to the rest. In Gameraica, earning twenty thousand dollars a year is below the poverty line, but people who do so are still part of the world's richest five percent. The median is all the way down to one thousand and five hundred dollars a year. Do you understand? Ninety-five percent are kept in poverty for the sake of a mere five percent! Don't you think it's weird?! What's the point of such a world?!" Joker yelled.

Joker calmed down, showing an amicable smile once more. Then again, perhaps his smiling face was only an impression given by his makeup.

"Fifty years ago, some guys thought the same and started a revolution, wishing for an egalitarian society. But they failed. Do you know why? They probably acted out of conviction at first. But the second they tasted riches and power, they got drunk on them. Their convictions turned into greed. It's only natural, but this is the whole reason I'm here. I'll achieve true equality, true impartiality, in this world where no one can let go of their greed... Everyone shall disappear together."

"Will you die as well?"

"Of course. I told you, right? I'm not acting out of greed, and I intend to die before my motives change. We will achieve a world with no more humans. By that time, there might not even be grass or trees left though. Oh well. Given a few hundred million or billion years, life will certainly appear again."

I leaned on the sofa, dumbfounded. This man wasn't insane. Neither his train of thought nor his emotions were those of a crazy person. But the conclusion he had reached was insane. I understood that no one would be able to change this man's mind no matter what. Killing him would be the only way to stop him.

"So," I started after a while. "What would you have me do? I'll be upfront with you. I don't intend to help you. I will never associate myself with your destructionist ideas!"

"It's okay. I don't care about what you think. You'll cooperate either way."

Joker took out a card on which a collar that looked like something you'd put

on a dog was depicted.



[Funabashi Dungeon]

“I’m sorry, but I cannot disclose other customers’ personal information. I’m also unable to tell you about other dungeons. I’d like to remind you that I’m just a peddler, not an information broker.”

Rita stood up and bowed once, rejecting my offer. She was still all smiles. I had Akane and Akira move back a few steps and stood right in front of Rita. *She’s not human. No need to show any pity.*

“I could always *make* you speak...”

“Kazuhiko-sama!” Akane tried to stop me.

The peddler whined and scratched her head, looking a bit troubled, before suddenly attacking me from my left side with tremendous force. I crashed into the wall and heard a loud crack, a few sparks flying into my field of vision. I raised my head painfully to get a better look and saw Akira pulling back Akane, who was trying to jump in. Rita still had a smile plastered on her face as she slowly lowered her right leg.

A simple kick was all it had taken? I felt my consciousness slipping away as I leaned on the wall. She hadn’t only broken my arm. My spine, as well as other bones, had been shattered as well. I heard footsteps coming closer.

“Ni hi hi! I’d rather you didn’t underestimate me so much, all right? I’m Rank S, you know. I’m traveling through dungeons all day long, so I need to be at least this strong. I could have killed you on the spot, but I let you off easy since I feel like you’ll become a repeat customer in the future. Anyway, see you next time. Bye!”

Damn... I messed up...

I passed out just like that.



“The peddler is also a part of the Dungeon System, just like us. She’s incredibly strong and can easily slaughter Rank A monsters on her own. You’re

very lucky she decided to spare your life,” Akane explained.

I had finally regained consciousness after being made to drink an Extra Potion and was now forced to listen to Akane’s scolding. I hadn’t actually intended to hurt Rita, and I hadn’t thought a threat of that level would’ve made her attack me like that.

“That was careless of you, Aniki. Even if you didn’t know how strong she was, you should have at least kept in mind that she wasn’t a normal person. It’s not like you to be so rash. You’re usually much more levelheaded,” added Akira.

“You’re right. It’s not like me to mess up like this. My bad...” I paused. “Where did the peddler go after that?”

“She disappeared,” Akane told us. “Apparently, if you kneel on the floor and say ‘Rita-sama, please come back!’ she’ll appear again.”

“What the...? You’re messing with me, right? She’ll come if we just call her normally, won’t she?” said Akira, surprised.

“The peddler is part of the Dungeon System, so she’s everywhere. Right now, she is likely inside every dungeon in the world simultaneously. Being everywhere and nowhere at once is the particularity of the peddler.”

Did I really intend to follow her instructions? Regardless, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d always been such a violent man. Up until I came in contact with the dungeons, I was just a regular guy of around forty, earning my living using my brain and my wits. I had never been violent nor had I ever threatened someone. Now, I was ready to use violence as a negotiation tool and didn’t hesitate to use my fists if the need arose. I had indeed become stronger thanks to the Enhancement Element, but I wondered if it had also changed me on a deeper level.

Have I...changed?

I felt the need to discuss this with someone. I could have gone to Ishihara, but I felt like someone who knew me before all of this had started was a better choice. Thankfully, I was in Funabashi. *Should I go have a drink with my childhood friend?* I wondered, my spirits lifting a little.

* * *

My childhood friend and I shared a drink in an izakaya called Mikazuki that specialized in Woorian food, which was located next to Keisei Funabashi Station. Iwamoto, the owner of a chain of pachinko parlors, and I had been friends ever since we'd entered elementary school. His line of work being what it was, he had strong ties with his Zainichi Woorian community—the ethnic Woorians who'd emigrated to Japan prior to 1945. Still, the complicated relationship between Japan and Woori had never impacted our relationship, and I really treasured the thirty years we had spent together. I couldn't imagine a better person to seek advice from when it came to my own personal issues, though it would be a different story if I had to discuss the dungeons specifically.

“Iwa-chan, I...” I hesitated. “Have I changed?”

“What do you mean? You lost a lot of weight last summer, didn't you? Are you asking if you changed after that?” he asked.

I nodded and told him about my encounter with Rita in the dungeon as well as other events, such as the time I had suddenly grabbed one of the Crusaders by the throat. I hadn't ever acted violently before the dungeons appeared, but I had already exhibited such behavior several times in the last few months, which worried me.

“Hmm... It's hard for me to say. Outside work, we only see each other for a drink from time to time, but you adventurers spend a lot of time fighting monsters, right? How often are you in the dungeons, Kazu-chan?”

“I don't even want to try counting. I've probably spent several years inside them already at this point.”

Time went by 144 times faster inside the dungeons. One month above ground was equivalent to around twelve years inside the dungeons. This meant that I must have already spent more or less ten years fighting in the dungeons.

“Then it's only natural you'd change,” Iwamoto said casually, smiling at me.

I put a boneless pork rib on the grill and started cooking it.

“Think about it. Anyone would go through some change after spending ten years fighting in a dungeon. When you say you ‘fight,’ that also includes killing the monsters, right? Even people who handle livestock for a living get used to

killing, you know. You also got used to violence. That's all there is to it," he continued.

"It's definitely a bad thing, though! Well, being able to kill in the dungeons is important, but acting like that towards people isn't okay! I've always avoided the sort of people who rely on their fists whenever things don't go their way, and yet..."

My pork rib was done, so I wrapped it in lettuce, put some kimchi on it, and dug in. Many people in Japan stayed away from anything Woorian due to the deterioration of Japan-Woori relations, but I thought that bringing nationalism into mundane affairs like meals was simply foolish. Tastiness is universal.

"It's true that you had virtually no connection to anything violent, but you were still quite the obstinate guy, Kazu-chan. Once you decide on something, you never budge. Do you remember when we were in fifth grade? You got into an argument with Maruyama-sensei."

"Did I? Ah... I kind of remember now. It was in history class, right?"

"You argued that the first kanji in the Konden Einen Shizai no Ho law wasn't in the program and that, since we weren't asked to learn it in Japanese class, we shouldn't be asked to write the name of the law in kanji in history class either. You fought with the teacher for ages!"

"Thinking back, it was so stupid..."

We both laughed.

"You've always been this way," Iwamoto continued, still laughing. "If you think you're in the right, you won't hesitate to stand your ground without considering the opinion of others. And if someone doesn't agree, you'll talk their ear off until they do. Or at least, that's how you were until middle school. After that, you started keeping your thoughts to yourself and being less forward, but I don't think your true nature ever changed."

"So now I also have the option of using violence instead of words to convince people," I said.

"No. You had that option from the very start. You just chose not to, Kazu-chan. So do most people. We naturally stay away from violence. I think it's

because we're not used to such behavior in our current society. It's not normal to use violence to convince people of things or settle issues, so we just pick the ways we're used to instead."

"I mean... I'd say guilt is also a big factor."

"That's true. But that guilt also stems from the fact that we're not used to it. Violent people don't feel guilty. In a way, they're numb to it. Since you fought in the dungeons for so long, you got used to picking that option... Or at least, that's how I see it."

I couldn't stop myself from clicking my tongue. Some people threw abusive words at others because they were in a bad mood or immediately resorted to violence just because someone bumped into them lightly. To be honest, I had always had nothing but contempt for those sorts of people. However, I was now becoming more and more like them, and I couldn't help but hate myself.

"I think the main difference between you and these people is that you have self-awareness," Iwamoto said as he poured some makgeolli for me. "Violent people usually only consider violent options, never reflecting on their behavior. Isn't the kanji for 'shame' written as 'ask your heart?' People who never reflect on themselves are shameless, but that's not your case, Kazu-chan. You've given it some serious thought and even came to me to discuss it."

"I'm not sure I feel much better..." I admitted.

"If you just wanted someone to coddle you, you should have gone to some hostess club instead. You came to me because you wanted my advice, right? If you want a little pick-me-up, should we head to one of my clubs after this?"

"You started dealing with cabaret clubs?"

"A dungeon popped up right in Funabashi. This means that rich young guys will swarm the city eventually. So I opened one right in front of the station last month. You should make it Dungeon Busters's hangout!"

"I'm gonna need to have a taste first."

I felt a bit better and downed my glass of makgeolli in one go.



[Edogawa City, Shishibone — Dungeon Busters Headquarters]

Dungeon Busters was a guild under which several parties were registered. Its members all lived around Edogawa City and agreed on time slots to go mine together in Yokohama or Shishibone Dungeon. This was why the members of Dungeon Busters had been advised to form an LLC despite adventurers usually being registered as self-employed. An LLC was easier to establish than a joint-stock company and fewer rules existed. That meant members could organize themselves and divide the benefits in any way they liked. While society didn't generally consider LLCs to be as trustworthy as joint-stock companies, that fact did not really matter for adventurers, and members of Dungeon Busters garnered a lot of attention just by being a part of Dungeon Busters, regardless of this usual bias.

LLCs were taxed as corporations, and the amount required to be pushed into a high tax bracket was more than that of regular-income taxpayers. As such, adventurers who earned large sums ended up having better take-home pay if they were part of a registered LLC. You could also count insurance and other such expenses as professional fees. The biggest perk was still the fact that LLCs were not subject to inheritance taxes. Everyone had someone they held dear, someone to whom they hoped to leave something behind. By using an LLC, it was even possible to make sure your next of kin would receive a pension in the event of your death.

Regardless of these legal matters, the Busters still tended to gather and do things together at their headquarters, mainly because of food.

"We're having beef tendon curry today. I made plenty, so don't hesitate to get seconds!" came the voice of a woman who was always surrounded by a gentle atmosphere.

The men immediately went to help her bring the big pot to the table. The vegetables and meat had all been bought from an online provider that specialized in delivering ingredients to businesses. When one's Rank went up, their metabolism also increased.

The kitchen was now managed by several women, as Kinouchi Shiori, who was in charge of the cooking, had sought help from some of her housewife

friends. Since their kids were now high schoolers, they now had time to work part-time. Shishibone was isolated, however, so they would've had no choice but to go all the way to Koiwa Station, Shinozaki Station, or Mizue Station if they wanted to find a job. It was nothing but beneficial that a job which was pretty much just an extension of their usual housekeeping duties had appeared right in their neighborhood.

One serving was composed of around a hundred grams of beef tendon and plenty of vegetables, and adventurers could get as many helpings of salad and soup as they wanted. However, no alcohol was served. There was a beer dispenser in the cafeteria, but it was only used when adventurers decided to throw parties.

"Hmm? Where's Kazu-san?" asked Shingo.

"He went to Funabashi Dungeon with Akira-san," Mari explained. "They left a message for you, Shingo-kun. If you manage to get to Rank E before they come back, they'll give you an SR weapon."

Two high schoolers were also eating their meals, sitting face-to-face in between the adults. Mari carefully observed her classmate once more. After spending more time together inside the dungeons, she was starting to understand his personality. He was a serious and honest person.

Although she had refused his confession some time ago, it wasn't because she particularly disliked him. She had said that her hands were full with the dungeons, but that was nothing but an excuse. The true reason was that Mari unconsciously distrusted men.

Her mother had given birth to her when she herself was in high school, and Mari could only imagine how harsh her mother's friends must have been with her. Regardless of hardships, her father had cheated on Shiori countless times before they finally ended up divorcing. He had no sense of responsibility, and Mari held him in contempt. She unconsciously assumed that teenage boys only ever thought about sex, just like her father, who had only approached her mother for her body.

Because of this, Mari was a bit puzzled by Shingo, who had still decided to join Dungeon Busters in spite of getting rejected. It annoyed her. Did he really want

to have sex with her that much? She didn't really get how someone could go so far just to get her to sleep with them. After a few days with him in the dungeons, however, she had gradually changed her mind. Dungeon Busters's Boot Camp wasn't so shabby that anyone could withstand it with a half-assed motive like that. Goblins had bitten Shingo several times, but he had gritted his teeth and kept walking. She now respected him as a fellow apprentice adventurer.

"Then I'm definitely reaching Rank E! Once I'm done eating, I'm going back in!" Shingo declared.

Mari had wanted to study for midterms afterward, but Shingo was too hotheaded. He'd go in alone if he had to, so Mari decided to tag along, albeit reluctantly.



[Funabashi Dungeon — Floor 7 — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Floor 7 of Funabashi Dungeon crawled with evil bugs. These Rank C monsters looked like giant pill bugs and were over two meters tall and five meters long. They charged at us, moving much faster than one would expect based on their size. *They must pack quite a punch, huh?*

"Evil bugs have a very sturdy shell, so physical strikes barely work on them. I think the easiest way to defeat them is to launch spells from afar. They're especially weak to fire. This being said, I don't think the two of you should have any issues defeating them," Akane said.

I leaped, kicking the wall to gain some momentum and unsheathing Zantetsuken midair. The giant bug was neatly cut into two halves. However, the front part kept moving. Akira readied his spear and stabbed it right into the thing's head before pulling the spear upward. The monster stopped right in its tracks. Only a B-Ranker could muster such strength.

"Huh. As expected of a bug. I should have cut it horizontally instead of vertically," I said.

"Right. You should try that on the next one."

We stood in the Enhancement Element left by the dead monster and

discussed battle tactics. It was important to keep reviewing and improving our methods as we went. For B-Rankers like us, it was fairly easy to fight evil bugs, but C-Rank adventurers would have a hard time fighting these things alone.

“The tank could keep the bug at bay while their teammates attacked from the side, skewering it.”

“What about magic attacks from afar? If they manage to burn its legs, it won’t be able to charge anymore.”

“Someone nimble enough might be able to evade its first charge and attack from above. However, I believe a weapon of at least Rank R would be needed to pierce the monster’s shell.”

The Busters would need to clear dungeons all over the world in the future. For that sake, it was important to share every bit of information we could about fighting tactics, as well as make teams practice in order to strengthen their cooperation skills. It was a straightforward method and took a lot of time, but I believed that it was the safest option, in the long run.

“We should reach the Final Floor in two or three more floors. I think the guardian will be Rank B,” Akane explained.

I left the scouting duties to her as we went deeper and deeper into the dungeon. Finally, we reached Floor 9, the Final Floor of Funabashi Dungeon. I took dozens of pictures of the relief as well as a video. This time, it showed a group of monsters bearing weapons and running.

“As always, I have no clue what this means. Is it supposed to be the Monster Stampede?”

“Don’t you think there are too few monsters for it to be the Stampede? There are barely ten monsters. I wonder where they’re running to, though.”

The guardians of Floor 9 were killer bees. A swarm of giant bees immediately attacked us. Another one—probably the queen, as it was significantly bigger than the others—stayed still in the back of the room.

“So the queen has an army of Rank D soldier bees, huh? Akane, can you clean up the small fries with your ninjutsu?”

“Please leave it to me...” Akane answered as she took out a piece of black fabric roughly the length of a bandage.

She swirled it around, and a black fog filled the room.

“This is poison mist. It won’t work on the queen, but it should be more than enough to take care of her underlings.”

“Okay, then I’ll handle the finishing touch!” Akira exclaimed before.

He jumped into the fog, holding his breath. The soldier bees were falling to the floor, one after another. The fog slowly started dissipating as Akane stopped moving. The queen had disappeared. Standing in the remaining fog was Akira, lightly tapping his nunchaku on his shoulder.

“I think I could move around holding my breath for around twenty minutes with no problem,” Akira stated. “I’m not really human anymore at this point, am I?”

“You’re just realizing that now? Ranking up means pushing past the limits of the human body, one step at a time. Once we’re done clearing every single dungeon, I intend to never set foot inside one of them again.”

Once all the dungeons were cleared, society would become wary of those of us who had long surpassed the bounds of humanity. I wanted to buy a southern island and spend the rest of my days in peace, away from everything.

“Kazuhiko-sama...”

Urged by Akane, I walked towards the Dungeon Core, which had just appeared.

* * *

<Breaking news! We’ve just received word from the Ministry of Defense. It appears Dungeon Busters has cleared the dungeon that was located in Funabashi City, Chiba Prefecture. This is the fourth dungeon to be cleared out of the twelve located in our country.>

<The Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau has announced that the next dungeon they’ve tasked Dungeon Busters with clearing is the one located in Shinjuku City, Tokyo. This choice has been made with the Tokyo Olympics in

mind, which are set to start on July 24, in mind, and...>

The sound of the TV gradually got drowned out as everyone raised their glasses.

“Let’s drink to celebrate the successful clearing of Funabashi Dungeon! Cheers!”

The seventeen adventurers, staff members, and apprentice adventurers of Dungeon Busters cheered as they held their glasses high. The LR character cards—Akane, Emily, Shifu Liu, and N’gie—had also been materialized. *Having them celebrate with us for one evening won’t cause any issues, will it?*

“Tasty! Sho Tasty!” N’gie said, gobbling down an extra large pizza all on his own.

This wasn’t a problem, since the pizza was made right in our kitchen, and we could get as many as we wanted.

I went around, chatting with everyone.

“Kazu-san, congratulations!”

“Congratulations!”

Mari and Shingo came to congratulate me. Since they came together, I assumed their relationship must have progressed a little. It didn’t seem to have moved forward enough for them to hold hands yet though. I must have really gotten old, since I now thought puppy love was endearing.

“So, did you get any stronger?” I asked.

I had intended to tease him a little bit, but Shingo smirked before suddenly lunging at me. I effortlessly stopped his fist with two fingers, keeping him in check. He’d probably assumed I’d be fine, even if he went all out on me.

“Oh my. You throw decent punches now! You managed to strengthen your core too. Wanna try participating in a martial arts competition? You’ll probably come out on top,” Akira commented while stuffing himself with Japanese-style fried chicken.

I wasn’t able to gauge others’ martial prowess as Akira could, but my past experiences had taught me how to read people pretty well. Shingo’s expression

was much better now. He wasn't the fidgety boy I'd met a while ago anymore.

"Shingo-kun!" reprimanded Mari.

Shingo looked proud as he withdrew his hand though.

"I reached Rank E! I'll be Rank D, and then Rank C before you know it!"

"I'm happy to see you all pumped up, but don't forget to study too, okay? If you get bad grades, I'll have you study in the dungeon," I warned him.

Shingo looked horrified as I patted his shoulder before walking away to talk to other members.

It was my first time speaking to some of them. I had placed a lot of emphasis on their personalities when recruiting them, so I doubted they would cause any issues. Troublesome members could eventually appear though, and I predicted that I wouldn't be able to fully devote myself to entering the dungeons in the near future.

At the height of the party, my phone rang. It was Director General Ishihara, so I went out into the courtyard to answer.

<Congratulations on clearing Funabashi Dungeon. You did a good job.>

"Thanks. I'm done with the report, so I'll send it over first thing in the morning. Did something else happen for you to call me so late?"

She must have something important to tell me if she had called at such an hour.

<My, my... I don't have the right to call you if I don't have a good reason? Maybe I just felt like hearing your voice.>

"Cut it out. We're both way past the age to say stuff like that. You want me to believe in your little romantic act?"

<So rude. All right, I have two matters I need to talk to you about. The Crusaders successfully cleared Venezia Dungeon. It's the second one after Paris. They work faster than you. Both were Rank D dungeons, from what I've heard.>

"I see. I'm hoping the Crusaders will handle all the dungeons in Europe and Gamera. I'll send them a message to tell them to keep at it. And? What's the

second thing you wanted to tell me?”

Our goal was to have all 666 dungeons cleared within ten years. There was no point in having Dungen Busters handle all of them. If the Crusaders could manage even a third of the total amount, it would make our job much easier. We needed to cooperate, not wage silly wars between ourselves.

<The second matter I wanted to bring up is Joker. The political unrest has started to settle down in Venisuela. The temporary president from the opposition, Clyde, has officially been named President and is currently working to restore peace in the country. There is one issue though. Venisuela has decided to pull out not only from the IDAO but also from the UN.>

“What?”

<I heard this from one of my journalist friends, so the information is still unconfirmed. There will be a press conference tomorrow at 6 p.m. Venisuelan time. That’s 7 a.m. here. Clyde was a sensible man, and his positions were rather moderate. He was also pro-Gamerica, so I don’t understand why he’s suddenly acting like this.>

“Joker must be behind this,” I said, after a pause. “Some items have incredibly dangerous effects, such as allowing you to force someone to be your slave. He most likely used such an item.”

<Our stance, as the government, is that we can’t maintain diplomatic relationships with countries that back Joker. This is what Prime Minister Urabe wants, at the very least. The issue will be how many countries will support Joker’s cause. Many countries in Africa and the Middle East are fundamentally anti-Gamerican and anticapitalist. They may try to use dungeon clearing as an excuse to wring money out of advanced nations.>

“If this happens, the world may end up splitting into two factions. Maybe this was Joker’s aim all along...”

<This is nothing but a theory at the moment. Our government hasn’t decided how to respond yet either. Regardless, there is no doubt the situation will deteriorate rapidly from here on out. I wanted you to know about all of this as soon as possible.>

As soon as the call ended, I was overtaken by a sudden impulse to kick the wall hard enough to break it. I couldn't allow myself to act this way in front of everyone, so I ended up gritting my teeth to contain my impatience and irritation.

Joker had said he was the Demon King. That might be true. It would have been easy to fight him if he were simply an evil villain, like those in fantasy stories, but the Demon King we were facing in real life had his own idea of justice and was skilled enough to gather supporters that agreed with his worldview. This wasn't a fight between good and evil. It was a fight between a hero and a Demon King, each upholding their own take on justice.

"Kazuhiko-sama?" Akane called, coming up to me from behind.

I took a deep breath and forced myself to smile.

Chapter 4: The World Falls into Turmoil

[Venisuela — Executive Office of the President]

Venisuela had been left in a chaotic state after the coup orchestrated by Joker, but as soon as Nicolai Clyde was appointed President, the monsters that had been roaming the streets disappeared at once. However, this did not equal a return to normalcy. The prisoners who had been released were all the more violent now that the threat of the monsters had disappeared, and public order in Caracas deteriorated further. The police had been corrupt in the first place, so no one took action.

“My dear citizens. As it stands, our country is nearing ruin. But what led us to such a situation? Was it the monsters attacking us? As you know, there are no more monsters roaming the streets of Caracas. Yet, robberies and assaults are common occurrences, and our police force, which should be striving to enforce order, is taking part in these despicable acts. But we know! We know that when someone is stabbed, they end up losing their life. When someone’s shop is plundered, they are left with no means to sustain themselves. When a woman suffers sexual assault, both her body and her mind remain wounded. We know such acts are unforgivable! Still, hundreds commit these atrocities in Caracas and all across our country. I hope my fellow Venisuelans, as well as the people of the whole world, will ask themselves a question. Are these criminals truly human? Are they not monsters?”

President Clyde’s speech was broadcast all over the world simultaneously, but only a few reporters were present. After the coup, most of the foreign journalists who were usually stationed in Venisuela had fled to neighboring countries. Only a few had stayed in Caracas and were currently participating in the press conference.

“Thinking about Venisuela’s future is my job. However, we need to find a way out of our current crisis before pondering a far-off future. The UN and the wealthy countries want us to put all of our resources into fighting the dungeons

to avoid the Monster Stampede that will occur in ten years. Can Venisuela survive for one more year, let alone ten years? What we need is not the insurance we'll be allowed to live in ten years... It's the means to stay alive today! If these countries wish to ask for our cooperation in clearing the dungeons, I demand that they provide us with the resources we need during the next ten years. If this is impossible, I ask that they allow our people to relocate to their countries and take care of our citizen's basic needs. They cannot demand that we cooperate if they are not willing to lend a helping hand themselves!"

President Clyde moved on to the next page of the notes he was reading from. In order to bring the situation of poor Venisuelan's to light, his expression was stern and his words harsh in spite of himself.

"If our request is refused, we will pull out from the UN and launch a new dungeon initiative alongside other countries also struggling to stay afloat day to day. The ones who will suffer the most from the Monster Stampede are those who have it all. Not us. After all, who knows if any of us will still be alive in ten years...? As such, we propose a redistribution of wealth. We ask that the twenty richest countries contribute twenty percent of their GDP to be redistributed to the other 180 countries in the world. This is our price for turning off the Monster Stampede."

Outrage erupted among the journalists. This was basically blackmail. Venisuela, which was currently one of the poorest countries in the world, was putting a knife to the throats of Gameraica, Japan, and the EU. The only way to bypass this would be to murder the busters, whose identities were unknown. In other words, the only way out would be to murder every single one of the thirty million inhabitants of Venisuela.

"Some have already successfully cleared dungeons in Venisuela. As time goes by, the number of busters will only go up. I hope the citizens of wealthy countries will carefully consider this matter. Your future will only cost you twenty percent of your revenue. Ask yourself whether you want to die in ten years or continue living. I do not mind if my methods are criticized. Either way, we have nothing left to lose, and that is the biggest strength of those who have nothing."

Every camera flashed at once.



[United States of Gameraica — White House]

“FUCK!!!”

The President of the United States of Gameraica, who would turn seventy this year, flew into a rage and kicked his desk. The Venisuelan President’s press conference had been a huge blow to Gameraica’s dignity. This kind of threat was almost a declaration of war to President Howard, a strong advocate of the “Gameraica First” ideology.

“I’ll grant their wish. Let’s bomb their goddamn country until not even a stone is left!!!”

“Mr. President, please calm down,” the president’s aide said. “Bombs won’t solve the issue if there are indeed busters in the country. If they’re smart, they would have gotten as far away from Caracas as they could after such a conference.”

Howard fell into his chair, breathing heavily, and downed his bottle of diet cola.

“We need to pay attention to the reaction of the poor countries of South Gameraica, Africa, and the Middle East. Africa is especially worrisome, as we’ve been able to detect at least a hundred dungeons on the continent. Things may become difficult to handle if Zimbabwei, Suudan, Yuganda, Somali, and a few of the Middle Eastern countries join Venisuela,” the aide continued.

“Which South Gamerican countries are most likely to join them?”

“The countries with the largest populations, such as Brezil and Colombian, will most likely stay clear of this. Argentina is part of the G20, so they should not agree either.”

“This means Venisuela will at least remain isolated within South Gameraica. We shouldn’t have any issue sending troops, then.”

“Mr. President, I would like to remind you that military action is unlikely to solve anything. Our target isn’t the country but rather individuals. On top of

that, they're busters. Even if we were to raze Venisuela to the ground, there's no guarantee they would die."

Howard looked pissed as he pressed a button on his desk. Another bottle of diet cola was brought to him immediately.



[Tokyo — Kantei]

The Japanese government was also aware of the situation in Venisuela. After the new president's press conference, which had almost been a war declaration, the cabinet ministers had called a meeting to discuss potential responses.

"Shouldn't we simply ignore him? He's just insane..." Souma, the Minister of Finance said, a strained smile plastered on his face.

Every person present in the room shared his feelings, but the government needed to come up with some sort of reaction. At this juncture, what mattered most wasn't responding to Venisuela itself but reassuring Japanese citizens by taking an appropriate stance.

"We cannot accept such ridiculous demands," Prime Minister Urabe said firmly. "Asking us to pay up if we wish for the dungeons to be handled is nothing less than terrorism. We should make it clear that we will not comply, and if they refuse to budge, I believe cutting all diplomatic relations with them to be the best course of action."

The Ordinary Diet Session was set to close at the end of May, and the Prime Minister intended to dissolve both houses immediately thereafter. The Upper House elections usually took place in August, but both the ruling party and the opposition had agreed to move them up because the Tokyo Olympics were approaching, in accordance with the special clause of the Public Offices Election Act. The dissolution would take place on May 29, with the elections following on June 28. Of course, the parties had already reached internal consensus.

"The report we received pointed out that some dungeon items allowed the user to brainwash people. The infamous Joker likely used such an item on Clyde."

“That must be the case, but we have no way of proving it. As long as this remains the official stance of the Venisuelan government, we have no choice but to strongly oppose it. What I fear is that some countries may agree with Venisuela’s stance. The Kingdom of Ko, in particular...”

There was only one poverty-stricken country in East Asia that was deeply anti-Gamerican. If they decided to join forces with Venisuela, it would pose a direct threat to Japan’s national security.

“If that happens, we will have no other choice but to ally ourselves with the Rushian Federation, the Republic of Sina, and the Republic of Woori to contain them,” said the Prime Minister. “After this meeting, I have a telephone conference planned with President Pedrov and President Zhou. Both Rushia and Sina supported the previous president, Madura, but they will not lend an ear to Clyde’s ridiculous demands.”

“Prime Minister, I believe we ought to pay attention to the Republic of Woori rather than the Rushian Federation or the Republic of Sina. President Park is a left-winger and very hostile towards Gamera. He also hopes to reconcile with the North. If the Kingdom of Ko sides with Venisuela, they will be forced to pick sides. Will they choose to save the world or destroy it?”

Prime Minister Urabe could not offer a definite answer to that question. His personal feelings prompted him to throw away all past enmities and contact President Park as soon as possible in order to convince him to form an alliance. However, he couldn’t move hastily when taking anti-Woorian sentiment into consideration. If he messed up now, it would have a tremendous effect on the upcoming elections.

“Let us observe the Kingdom of Ko’s reaction first. Surely, they do not wish for the world to be destroyed either. There’s a fair chance they will not side with Venisuela...”

Even as he spoke, Prime Minister Urabe understood how unlikely what he hoped for was. After all, the Kingdom of Ko was the type of country that was fully prepared to let thousands of people starve to death just to avoid bowing down to Gamera.

Prime Minister Urabe wouldn’t be surprised if they thought everything would

be fine as long as Gamera perished alongside them. Everyone around the table now understood how scary those who had nothing were.



[Dungeon Busters]

Golden Week of 2020 kicked off with Showa Day, after which there were two more working days followed by five consecutive days off, including public holidays and the weekend. Some people took the chance to use up four paid vacation days to enjoy a grand total of twelve days off, but Dungeon Busters operated as usual. The dungeons in Sapporo, Funabashi, Yokohama, and Kanazawa were already bustling with miners and boot campers, so the Busters gathered at headquarters in Shishibone, setting times to enter the Rank A Dungeon, Abyss, together to increase their ranks.

“Members who are Rank D and under will train on Floor 2 and Floor 3. Rinko, Masayoshi, Amane, and Hisato, you go to Floor 4. As for Akira and I, we’ll head to Floor 5 and try to reach Rank A,” I said.

“Aniki, what about cooperation training?” asked Akira.

“We’ll work on that after we’ve all managed to rank up. I especially want the D-Rankers to reach Rank C. The range of actions available to you expands greatly after reaching that level. We should be able to adjust the current teams’ attack patterns and teach them new patterns altogether after that.”

I looked at the world map I had put up on the wall. A few hundred red pins, as well as two blue pins and two white pins, had been stabbed into it. I picked up a black pin and stabbed it right into Venisuela.

“Up until now, we’ve only had to exchange red pins for blue or white ones. However, I’ve had to use a black pin for the first time. It means that, although the dungeon has been cleared, the Monster Stampede hasn’t been switched off. This is the work of that insane bastard, Joker. His actions are the antipode of everything we stand for. He and his goons believe that the Monster Stampede should take place and wipe out all of humanity. From now on, we’ll have to race against these guys. Every new black pin pushes humanity closer to the brink of extinction.”

I looked at all my members. They seemed to take my words seriously. Having a reason to fight for someone or something greater than oneself was the first condition of joining Dungeon Busters. If someone didn't have that kind of motivation, it would be nearly impossible to continue fighting in the darkness of the dungeons for years on end. After all, the reason most miners stopped whenever they had earned a decent amount of money was that fighting monsters was hard on them from a mental health standpoint. No one could withstand this for the sake of profit alone.

"We will now all be entering the dungeon. Mukai-san, can I ask you to keep track of everyone's schedules and handle the monster cards and items everyone brings back?" I asked.

"Of course. Please leave it to me. I have already prepared a chart to write everything down."

"Mutsuo and the others are on leave until the fifth. When they come back, be sure to work them hard to make up for it. I would like to strengthen our security system some more in preparation for the future."

"I think their current activities will become great publicity for us. Although, they seem to be doing them as hobbies..."

Mutsuo and his friends were currently in Ariake preparing for Super Comic Sale, an event that would take place during Golden Week. Apparently, their booth would be much bigger than last year's. I had kind of wanted to stop them when I saw Akane's figures and Emily's posters, but...

I pulled myself together and turned to face Mari's mother. Mari and Shingo had helped Shiori during a boot camp in Abyss, and she now looked so young that she appeared to be in her late twenties. If she stood next to her daughter, most people would probably think Shiori was Mari's big sister rather than her mother.

"Shiori-san, could you take care of the cooking and the laundry? Most of our members are equipped with an Other-Dimensional Pouch, but the dishes that can be cooked inside the dungeon are quite limited. I expect it will be hard to cook four meals a day for everyone, but it is an important job that will greatly affect our training."

“There are ten of us, so we’ll be able to handle it. Don’t worry. We’ll make sure to cook meals with a lot of meat,” she answered with a soft smile.

We prepared our equipment, making sure to pack a lot of potions. Then our preparations were complete.

“All right, let’s go! It’s power leveling time.”

Everyone cheered, and we entered the Rank A Dungeon, Abyss.



[Vatican State — Crusaders]

“I’m sorry, but I will have to refuse,” Rolf, the leader of the Crusaders said, bluntly rejecting the proposal.

One of the high-ranking members of the Teutonic Order had demanded that his son be allowed to join the Crusaders. Such requests had also come from members of the Knights Hospitaller and Knights Templar. They had tasked Sakaguchi Stefano, the head of the Dicastery for Reconquista of Dungeon Crusaders to make the request for them, and Rolf couldn’t help but think it was especially cunning of them.

“We, the Crusaders, are not fighting for the sake of riches or glory. We are clearing the dungeons to prevent the apocalypse. That’s our one and only goal. If these people have the same ideals, there is no need for them to join the Crusaders. Each Order should put together other groups to enter the dungeons,” Rolf explained.

“I agree. I don’t even think these people *want* to join us. They’re just being pushed by their parents. Since the Crusaders became famous, they want their share of the cake. We were the founding members, so it’s a bit too late to worry about that, but I’d like our next recruit to at least make the decision to join themselves,” Marco added.

“A civilian adventurer initiative has already been put into place in Europe. I heard that hundreds of applicants are jumping at the opportunity in every country. If they truly want to join us, they should show their resolve first. If anyone catches our eye, we’ll reach out to them ourselves,” Alberta finally said.

Both she and Marco fully supported Rolf's decision. Sakaguchi looked as though he had expected them to refuse and threw the recommendation letter he held back on top of the pile on his desk with a strained smile. He didn't support endeavors so obviously motivated by greed either, but he did want to make the Crusaders into a bigger organization. The Dungeon Busters, after which he was modeling the Crusaders, had already added more than thirty adventurers to their ranks and were even recruiting high school students as apprentices. It would take much longer than ten years for the Crusaders to finish clearing every European dungeon with only six members.

Of course, this did not mean everyone who showed a bit of potential would be allowed to join. Even if they stopped requiring that the new recruits be the direct descendants of Order members, they would need to have been baptized at the very least. This meant the pool of potential applicants was limited from the get-go.

Sakaguchi expressed his worries to Rolf.

"If we're able to find someone who has been accepted as a civilian adventurer and is able to provide a hundred monster cards to show his will to join us, we'll welcome them," Rolf offered, as a compromise.

"This is a solid plan. Gathering a hundred monster cards means killing over three thousand F-Rank monsters. Someone who was pushed by their parents and has no personal motivation won't be able to do so."

"We should still ask the Adventurer Bureaus of each country to verify the adventurer's achievements. After all, I wouldn't have hesitated to get some boys to gather cards for me in the past. Someone's bound to find a way to cheat," Franca said.

"How immoral of you, Franca," Léonard reprimanded, sighing.

Franca barely shrugged. Despite their very different personalities and backgrounds—Léonard was righteous and proper while Franca had spent quite some time roaming the unsavory backstreets of Rome, acting like a delinquent—they got along pretty well. Looking at the six youths, Sakaguchi remembered the report he had received from Ezo Kazuhiko, the leader of Dungeon Busters.

The Crusaders are now an accomplished team. If you intend to recruit more

people, I recommend forming another separate team of six people. If the balance they have achieved is put in jeopardy, the whole team is likely to collapse.

“I understand your reservations. I shall accept Rolf’s proposal. I will reply to these recommendation letters and ask that they provide a hundred monster cards if they are serious about joining. I expect at least half of the candidates to give up immediately.”

“If half of them stick around, that’s already more than enough. If they are serious about fighting together, I will welcome them and help them practice sword-fighting.”

It was decided that new recruits would join the Crusaders, but it seemed picking out appropriate members would take a while longer.



[Venisuela — Maracaibo]

Maracaibo, the second biggest city in Venisuela, was located on the shore of the Lago de Maracaibo around six hundred kilometers west of Caracas. It was connected to the rest of the country by the General Rafael Urdaneta Bridge. If you traveled along that colossal bridge of over eight kilometers from Santa Maria, you’d soon reach a bustling city, thriving thanks to oil money.

The Lago de Maracaibo was especially famous for its lightning. Due to a natural phenomenon, known as the Catatumbo lightning, lightning strikes could be sighted more than two hundred times an hour over the lake. This happened around 150 times every year on average and went on for entire nights. The first westerners to witness this during the Age of Discovery nicknamed this phenomenon the “Lighthouse of Maracaibo,” and it still happened now, after more than four hundred years.

Two buses and one truck were currently traveling across the bridge that allowed people to cross this area so often struck by lightning. The three vehicles entered the old town of Maracaibo without stopping once before finally parking on the main street.

“Block every pathway! Don’t let any car enter this area. And make sure to

secure food! We need meat and bread! Don't forget to leave a bill after taking it. Do not steal."

A bunch of muscular men got out of the bus and locked down the whole area as they had been told. They were all armed, and passersby ran away as soon as they saw them.

"Good, good. We're using Madura's dirty money, so don't hesitate to spend it freely. It should go back to the citizens."

A slender man got off the bus and started laughing madly. He was made up like a clown and wore bright, eye-catching clothes. He threw his cigarette butt to the floor.

"Boss, we found the dungeon's entrance."

Joker skipped along the Calle Carabobo, in the direction of the dungeon. Joker grabbed a camera from one of his underlings and started talking.

"Here, have a look! This is one of the dungeons that appeared in Venisuela. We're going to go clear it. Of course, we'll leave the Monster Stampede on ON. If you guys don't hurry up and make a decision, I'll end up forgetting who cleared which dungeon, you know? Money! Money! Money! If you don't wanna die, you're gonna have to pay up! If you don't... Well... Heh heh heh! You'll all end up dead! Hya ha ha ha ha!"

He turned off the camera and reverted to a straight face in a matter of seconds. Over ten men were lining up in front of him. After a while, a man came running, carrying several bags.

"Boss! We bought the food!"

"Good. You're in charge of the circulation now. Crossing this road now costs a thousand dollars upfront. Use that money to treat yourselves to as much tasty food as you like. I'm assuming you're all very much aware of this already, but you're all part of the Demon King's legion. We're here to bring forth a new world order. So don't go dabbling in robbery or violence no matter what, or I'll skin you alive."

The men couldn't repress shudders. One guy had gone against Joker's orders earlier, and Joker had delivered on his promise, skinning him alive before

finishing him off. On the other hand, you were rewarded with money and food if you properly followed his orders. With a thousand dollars, it'd be easy to go buy women as well. None of his subordinates even thought about betraying Joker. Every one of them was thoroughly fascinated by the man.

“Off we go.”

Joker left a few of his men above ground and started down the stairs.



[Venisuela — Official Residence of the President]

The new president of Venisuela, Nicolai Clyde, had shocked the whole world with his inaugural speech and was already hard at work in Venisuela. Parliament couldn't assemble at the moment because of the trouble created by Joker, so Clyde had declared martial law for a period of six months and was putting together vigilante corps in every major city while he tried to purge the police and bureaucracy of corruption. He was also selling the cards he had received from Joker in order to obtain foreign currency.

“This Extra Potion will not restore your youth, but it does have the power to fix any injury or illnesses you may have,” said Clyde. “It is only natural that you start having some health troubles in your seventies, but if you use this potion, you'll be able to live for a long time.”

A bottle containing a blue liquid was set on the desk. Ricardo Ortiz, a billionaire from Mejicanos, a country located in Central Gameraica, unconsciously loosened his necktie. With a fortune of over seventy billion dollars, Ricardo, soon to turn eighty, was at the head of the most successful telecom company in South Gameraica. He had built his empire from the ground up in just one generation. In spite of his advanced age, he still hoped to expand his business further, but the recent appearance of the dungeons, as well as the rumor that the world might collapse in ten years, had caused him to hesitate. That was when he had heard that Venisuela had started to smuggle potions and had secretly organized a meeting.

“The IDAO has asked every country to strictly manage the flow of medicines that lengthen people's life spans or allow missing limbs to be regrown. Since the number of civilian adventurers is growing by the day, however, they'll

eventually obtain Extra Potions as well. Still, only a handful of these will circulate on the market, let alone higher-grade potions...”

Clyde set another bottle on the desk, this one filled with a golden liquid. This potion did not appear on the IDAO’s website nor on Dungeon Busters’s card information page.

“This is an SR Rank potion, Elixir. It seems to have the power to modify one’s body. If you use this one, your body should return to how it was in your twenties.”

This offer was extremely attractive to Ricardo, akin to the devil himself directly whispering sweet promises in his ear. He was a man who had amassed a tremendous fortune single-handedly. As such, outsiders might have thought that he had lived a good enough life, but that wasn’t the case at all. Ricardo wanted to live longer *because* he had made it big. The desire to live longer was much stronger for wealthy people than it was for everyday people.

“Is your country not supporting that crazy man called Joker and calling for the world to be destroyed? What is the point of getting back my youth if the world is doomed?”

Faced with Ricardo’s skepticism, the servant of the Demon King kept whispering enchanting words.

“Don Ortiz... Did you really believe that we hoped to bring the world to ruin? We just happen to need foreign countries to support us if we want to survive our current economic crisis. By making such a statement, we also had an easier time convincing our own citizens. This is nothing more than a threat. A means to an end, if you will. I’m happy to prove it...”

Clyde produced a picture. It showed the status window of the Dungeon Core. The Stampede was turned off and the countdown had appeared. This didn’t mean much. After all, this picture could have been taken right before the switch was turned back on. What mattered was whether Ortiz would trust him or not, or rather, whether he wanted to trust him or not.

“You’re nearing eighty and may not live another ten years. If you obtain a youthful body, however, you’ll happily live ten more years...and perhaps a few dozen more after that. At the moment, I believe that even Dungeon Busters has

yet to acquire this Elixir. So... Would you like to buy it?"

"How...? How much is it?"

"I'll let you have it for thirty percent of your total assets... That's around twenty-one billion dollars."

The old man let out a sigh and gave up the fight.



[Oriental Republic of Sina — Zhou Haoran]

The Oriental Republic of Sina was a large country, around 9.6 million kilometers squared, as well as the most populous one, with a population of 1.4 billion. Ninety percent of its population were Han Sinese, but that ethnic group had never been clearly defined. Han Sinese was an umbrella term that referred to the people who had lived under the rule of the Han dynasty, who had unified the land in the distant past. As a result, some Han Sinese even spoke different languages. Sinese civilization had brought forth several schools of thought and many traditions throughout its five-thousand-year-long history, and the easiest way to define the Han Sinese was to say that it referred to the people who belonged to and accepted that sphere of influence.

The most prominent members of the Communist party were holding a meeting in Zhongnanhai, which was at the heart of the Xicheng District of Beijing, to discuss government policies. Most of the 127 dungeons that had appeared in Sina were located in metropolitan areas. While some had appeared in back alleys and could be somewhat managed, the ones that cut off arterial roads or were situated right in the courtyards of important facilities were an issue. The government couldn't afford to conserve every single of these 127 dungeons.

The most problematic dungeon of them all was one that had appeared in Tiananmen Square, where the Great Hall of the People stood. The government wanted this dungeon gone at all costs, but preliminary investigations had revealed that there was no safety zone on Floor 1. Another such dungeon had been discovered in Osaka, Japan and had been classified as a Rank S dungeon—the hardest of dungeons to clear.

“President Zhou, I believe we have no choice but to tackle the problem step-by-step. Luckily, around twenty percent of the dungeons in the country have been assessed to be Rank D. How about focusing on these first?”

“We used the guide published by Dungeon Busters and managed to raise twenty adventurers to Rank C. However, half of them are in a very unstable mental state... If I may speak bluntly... They’ve gone crazy.”

Every person in the room wore a dark expression. Dungeon Busters was the best adventurer clan in the world, with two Rank B adventurers and four Rank C adventurers, but their biggest asset was their ability to nurture new members. At the very start of the guide they had published, they insisted on the importance of a spontaneous and selfless motive. They pointed out that people who were compelled into entering the dungeons or did so out of personal interest would eventually find the limit of their growth.

“The guide states that to reach Rank C, an adventurer must wear weights totaling around thirty kilograms and kill over 150,000 monsters while keeping a pace of one monster defeated per minute. They must not take breaks outside of sleeping and eating... This would take around 180 days in dungeon time. When I first read the guide, I thought it was a joke.”

They continued.

“In the end, half of them were in no condition to fight in dungeons anymore, but the other half succeeded. We now have ten Rank C adventurers. However, they pose a significant risk. Their powers are right out of a fantasy movie, which makes them a serious military threat. C-Rankers are even able to easily evade bullets.”

The Oriental Republic of Sina was deliberately delaying the introduction of a civilian adventurer initiative. The main reason for this was public safety. In the span of one year, over a hundred thousand riots had broken out in the country. Letting people unrelated to the current political party grasp such power could lead right to the fall of the regime, as the Sinese political theory of the Dynastic Cycle dictated. On the other hand, more and more citizens were expressing their worries that Japan and the EU were moving forward on this issue while Sina wasn’t. The government had no choice but to allow civilians to enter the

dungeons sooner or later.

“Let me think... How about opening up ten dungeons in Beijing or Shanghai to the public first? We could try implementing an experimental civilian adventurer system for the time being. Until we have enough C-Rankers in the People’s Liberation Army, we will only allow civilians to be miners and reach Rank D at most. This initiative could be implemented for a year before we revise the system.”

“This is a good idea. We should also put some limitations on who is allowed to enter the dungeons. If we only allow high school graduates to participate in the initiative, we should be able to minimize the risk of criminal offenses being committed.”

“We have also been receiving more and more complaints from groups suffering discrimination, such as migrants. We need to decide how to handle Hong Kong too. Even if we are able to start using hydrogen technology, it will not be easy to reduce the country’s disparities.”

Following the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, the Oriental Republic of Sina had been putting all of its forces into developing its economy, increasing its GDP thirty times greater in the span of thirty years. This astounding growth had naturally resulted in some undesirable effects: environmental issues, disparities between regions, white-collar crime, and other morally reprehensible issues. To top it off, corruption was rampant in the government, which added to the list of issues that needed to be tackled.

In the long history of Sina, dynasties such as the Song or Ming had fallen soon after reaching their peak. Zhou Haoran was very much aware that his party was currently welcoming its peak. If he messed up now, the Oriental Republic of Sina was doomed to fall in a few decades, if not sooner. This sense of crisis led him to rule his country with an iron fist.

Now that the meeting seemed to have reached a consensus, the president spoke, concluding things.

“We need to secure magic stones and build hydrogen power plants at the same time. We will also put an experimental adventurer initiative in place while dealing with criminal adventurers and corrupt individuals seeking profit with a

firm hand. Let us start with opening three dungeons in the Beijing area. These should be the easiest to control. As for Hong Kong, we shall use Beijing as a model and let the authorities there handle things.”

President Zhou Haoran continued.

“Due to the high unemployment rate of the youth, many demonstrations have been breaking out in Hong Kong. We’ll use the adventurer initiative to keep that in check. If we show that we are working to fix the issue, the demonstrators should calm down somewhat.”

Although an adventurer system had finally been introduced in the EU, the rest of the world, including Gamera, still lagged behind. They either hadn’t introduced a system at all or were still in an experimental stage. It appeared that most politicians were reluctant to give the people such tangible powers. If anything, Gamera and Sina were the norm, while Japan, which hadn’t faced any trouble in spite of having already introduced an adventurer initiative, was the oddball.



[Rank A Dungeon Abyss — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On Floor 5 of the Rank A dungeon located in Shishibone, the B-Rank monsters called ancient mages showed up. Akane, N’gie, and I had had a run-in with them in the past and retreated. However, Akira—a B-Ranker—as well as four C-Rankers—Rinko, Amane, and the others—were here this time. On top of that, N’gie had leveled up to Rank B. I thought that we would be more than able to fight them, but...

“Yosshii! Guard the left side!” Akira directed.

“Got it!”

The four C-Rankers were going up against the three ancient mages that had appeared. Masayoshi raised his shield and blocked a blast of fire magic. Rinko and Hisato used that time to attack the same enemy. Although the ancient mages used a physical attack barrier, they couldn’t block several attacks at the same time. Rinko’s hit was nullified, but Hisato’s sword connected, cutting through the monster. The ancient mage moved back with a groan before its

body started glowing.

“I won’t let you!”

Amane’s dual whips came flying. Even if the monster could block one of her whips with its barrier, the other one was bound to connect. Yet, both of her whips were blocked. In this short time, the monster had already recuperated from the damage dealt by Hisato.

The ancient mage that had been casting healing magic stepped forward as if to change places with the ancient mage that had retreated. The third ancient mage, who had been firing magic attacks at Masayoshi continuously, also moved back. The situation was once again three versus four. I couldn’t help but bite my lower lip as I watched the fight unfold.

“So these are Rank-B monsters... On top of having even better coordination than goblin soldiers, they were able to read several moves ahead and implement tactics. We’re not just hunting down monsters anymore. If we were in a game, this kind of fight would be at the level of PVP.”

“The higher the rank, the smarter the monsters will be. Some Rank A monsters are likely to be capable of human speech. They can think, research, experiment, discover new things...”

“We can’t falter here. We’re only on Floor 5...”

I had Rinko and the others fall back, and we took their place. N’gie rushed in, holding up his enormous shield. Akane jumped over his head and unleashed her ranged attack, Homuranagi, from above. It wouldn’t deal much damage, but that didn’t matter. The aim was to divert the monsters’ attention. N’gie kept pressing forward, crashing straight into the barrier. Akira and I jumped in from the sides at that exact moment.

“HOYAAAA!!!”

One of the monster’s heads flew off after a single swift blow of Akira’s nunchaku. I beheaded another with my Zantetsuken almost simultaneously. Finally, Akane got rid of the last one.

Their physical resistance was actually pretty low without the barrier, so cutting off their heads was an easy way to defeat them. The difficult part was

finding a way to hit them while evading their magic attacks.

“We’re basically playing a game of chess at this point. We’ve reached the limits of what we can do by just raising our ranks and going in headfirst like overpowered main characters. We’ll need to use our brains to defeat monsters that are Rank B and above. This was a good lesson,” I said.

“We need to make sure we finish them off. Not a single one can escape after we start fighting. If they do, they’ll feed the others information about us, and they may come up with counters. Brrr. Just thinking about things like them getting out to the surface has me shivering,” Akira responded.

He shrugged, but this was no laughing matter. Just three such ancient mages could probably wipe out a whole city by themselves. On top of using ranged magic attacks and having a physical attack barrier that could block hits, they could even cast healing spells, although these spells weren’t all-powerful. Still, their most frightening trait was their intellect. Up until now, I had made a point of devising and refining battle tactics, which had borne fruit. Implementing the PDCA cycle had allowed us to minimize risks as much as possible while we increased our ranks. And yet, monsters were now also using this method.

We weren’t in a game. The monsters could also grow.

“This is a new threat,” I said. “Let’s gather intel on the ancient mages and share it with the whole world. We need to let everyone know that we are not the only ones capable of ranking up.”

Rinko and the others nodded, their expressions grim.

Akane readied her Shinobigatana. In the distance, I could make out the silhouette of four ancient mages. They sure moved fast.

If we kept fighting here, we’d eventually reach Rank A. Unbeknownst to me, I wore a smile on my face.



[Rank A Dungeon Abyss — Yamaoka Shingo]

Name: Yamaoka Shingo

Title: None

Rank: E

Possession Limit: 13/30

Skills: Card Slot, Reconnaissance (Lvl. 1), _____, _____

“Oooh, it’s pretty rare for someone to have four skill slots. Usually, people only have three,” said Emily.

“Ah... Yeah...” I said.

While I was looking at my status window, Emily came up next to me to take a look. She was quite the headstrong girl, but she was as beautiful and cute as Kinouchi-san... No, I mean, as Mari. If Emily were in our class, Mari might suddenly be only half as popular.

Anyways, I felt like I had changed during the last two weeks. I didn’t really know how to chat with girls in the past... So being on a first-name basis with Kinouchi Mari, the school idol, made me feel like I was in a dream. And yet...

“Shingo-kun, you’re blushing,” Mari said, throwing a sharp, sidelong glance at me.

I rubbed my cheeks reflexively, and the two beauties laughed. I ended up laughing alongside them. If my friends saw me acting chummy with them like this, they’d probably come for my neck.



“Hmm... Something’s coming.”

My skill, Reconnaissance, pretty much allowed me to feel when someone or something was close. I just got a vague inkling when monsters were approaching for now, but I was told I’d be able to sense every being on a given floor if I could level this skill up. At least, I’d heard that one of the Crusaders had reached this level. Kazu-san had even personally asked me to work on this skill, as it was extremely rare and valuable.

Eventually, a two-meter-tall orc showed itself. I grabbed the middle sword I had been given.

The working conditions here really are the best! The other civilian adventurers needed to find weapons on their own while we were allowed to use the weapons provided by Dungeon Busters from the get-go. We could try out several weapons before deciding which one suited us best. In fact, some people, such as the Rank B adventurer Shishido Akira, had mastered several weapons. He used spears, gauntlets, and nunchakus.

“You gotta rank up fast, you know? Mari is gonna get tired of waiting for you!”

“Emily-chan! I said I’d wait...”

Mari looked a little flustered, but her pet rabbit, Myu-chan, nodded in her stead. “Myuu! Myuu!”

Emily was right. My goal was to reach Rank D as soon as I could. Once I graduated high school, I would join Dungeon Busters as a true adventurer. Then, I’d travel the world to clear dungeons, reach Rank C, then Rank B, and become a man strong enough to protect Mari!



[United States of Gamera — Department of Defense]

<YOU!!! Do you want to save the world? Are you ready to take up arms to join this grand, never-ending battle? Do you have the will to fight tirelessly for ten hours every day? To sacrifice your life for the sake of the world and your loved ones? If your answer is YES, join us at Dungeon Commando!!!>

Rebecca, the secretary, read the pamphlet before letting out an exasperated sigh. To raise Rank C adventurers, there was no choice but to fully trample upon the rights of workers, ignoring overtime or paid holiday regulations. The people of Dungeon Busters clearly had not given any thought to work-life balance when they wrote their guide. After 180 days of dreadful nonstop fighting, the door to Rank C may or may not open... What absurd bullshit. When she read the guide she even wondered if this was some sort of Japanese ploy at first.

“Compared to that, the wars in Vietnam and Iraq were child’s play. So... Did anyone bother applying after reading a pamphlet like this?” Rebecca asked, looking at the man sitting cross-legged across from her, who kept spinning in his luxurious leather chair.

Isaac Roland, the man in charge of handling the Gamerican dungeon response as Command Chief, fanned himself with the pamphlet while laughing at his own situation.

“I know what I’m asking for is insane, but people going past the human body’s limits is already an insane thing in itself. I can’t order people around and force them to go through this. That’s why I’m trying to recruit volunteers. If someone who isn’t truly ready for this is forced to do it, they’ll definitely develop PTSD, as Mr. Ezoe pointed out. That’s why I’m checking every candidate’s motives through interviews.”

Since Rank C adventurers had appeared in Japan, the EU, and even the Oriental Republic of Sina, Gamerica had no choice but to start taking dungeon clearing seriously as well. The government had thus issued a direct order to clear dungeons, saying that one dungeon should be cleared, at the very least.

“We need people who aren’t in it for fame or money, people who want to stand up to the dungeons for the sake of their families. We can’t have people fighting for the country itself either. Such an abstract motive won’t cut it. They have to be doing it for someone or something concrete. If not, they won’t be able to withstand it,” said Isaac.

“You are aware that we are going to receive complaints from the NCLU and other human rights organizations, right?”

“Let them complain. We’re on the brink of extinction. Who the hell cares

about human rights? If we do nothing, everyone dies. People like them won't admit they were wrong until the instant goblins start sinking their teeth into them."

"If I may bring up something that could be linked to this..." Rebecca started. "It's about Joker. Some groups here have declared they'd follow him, including radical sects, extremist groups, and Satanist groups."

"The idiots are at it again," Isaac answered after a while, sighing.

Rebecca's expression also darkened. Gameraica was a free country. Being allowed to say that humanity should go extinct and that the dungeons ought not to be cleared was also included in that freedom. However, the rise of the internet had made it all too easy for any individual to advocate their opinion. It wasn't an ideal situation from the point of view of a lawmaker. Using the media to sway public opinion was a popular tool that had been widely used all through the twentieth century, and while it was still in use nowadays, it was gradually losing its effectiveness. Extremist views and demagoguery tended to easily garner support, which in turn, had led to the rise of populism in advanced countries.

"Although the majority is still against it, more and more people are starting to declare themselves in favor of supporting Venisuela if it means the Monster Stampede can be stopped. A 'Joker Fund' has even been established. If every one of the three hundred million people on Earth who earn more than twenty thousand dollars a year gives a hundred dollars, that would already amount to thirty billion dollars, even without going as far as offering up twenty percent of our GDP. That's more than enough to turn the economic situation of Venisuela around. It's no wonder some people are starting to think it is an acceptable price to ensure survival."

"We're facing a terrorist attack on the whole of humanity rather than on a single country. It's not surprising that the most sensitive people are already thinking of paying up. However, if they get away with this once, we'll never see the end of it. What Joker is saying isn't wrong. For the Gameraican people to enjoy thick steaks to their heart's content, there also need to be people who can barely afford to feed themselves with cheap porridge. We drive other people to misery so that we may enjoy a happy life. That's what capitalism is in the end. Maybe the equality that comes with the end of the world is the best

that the people who have been given the short end of the stick repeatedly can hope for.”

“I wonder how everything will turn out...” Rebecca said after a while, her face pale.

Isaac remained silent.



[Dungeon Busters Headquarters]

My name is Okajima Takashi, and I’m twenty-five. I graduated from university and have been working in my home prefecture, Nagano, ever since. My family isn’t all that well-off, so I got a student loan to pay for university. After graduation, I was left with debt to pay off in monthly installments for around twenty years. After three years in the workforce, I had to face a big issue though: my girlfriend got pregnant.

My net income was around one hundred fifty thousand yen per month, and I had to pay back twenty-six thousand yen. If I had to provide for a child on top of that, my financial situation was bound to become quite difficult. My girlfriend told me she would abort, but I wasn’t about to force her to give up on the baby just because of money. That would make me a failure as a man, and I was sure I’d regret it for the rest of my life. I needed to earn money somehow for the sake of my baby, so I decided to go down the path of an adventurer.

“Here, Okajima-san. This is your pay for today, five hundred thousand yen.”

I was given a thick envelope full of crisp banknotes. My hands shook. I had just joined Dungeon Busters, the world’s largest adventurer clan, whose goal was to get rid of the dungeons. After going through a boot camp, I had earned my adventurer license and immediately got an interview with the staff of Dungeon Busters. I’d decided to be honest with them, telling them I absolutely needed to earn money for my child, who was yet to be born.

After that first interview, I was made to wait for fifteen minutes before meeting with the boss, Ezoe Kazuhiko-shi, for the last interview. Ezoe-shi asked me why I wanted to join them.

“After all, being a miner should be more than enough if it’s just for the sake of

money,” he had said.

I told him that I wanted to protect my child. He paused, studying my face for a while before smiling.

And now, here I was, in the dorms of the Busters headquarters.

“Rie, I’m back.”

I entered the room, and Rie, who was now six months pregnant, welcomed me with a smile. I had reached Rank E already and hoped to make it to Rank D before the end of Golden Week. After that, I’d aim for Rank C, then B, and work alongside the Busters to save the world. One day when my child was older, I’d be able to brag that daddy was one of the heroes who had saved the world.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“I’m good. I have plenty of people paying attention to my condition, and my senpai are also there for me. They’ve been telling me what to expect and what I should pay attention to.”

Dungeon Busters employed housewives from the neighborhood to take care of the cafeteria. We could eat food that had been carefully prepared—taking into account portion size, taste, and nutritional balance—for free. Honestly, I was tempted to stay in the dorms forever. This was impossible though. We’d get married after the baby was born and need to leave this place as well.

Once I reached Rank D, I was to join Team Kirihara. Our job would be to focus on handling the adventurers turned criminals who were bound to eventually appear, rather than clearing dungeons. Ezoe-shi had directed me to this team himself, saying that it would be better for a newlywed like me.

“Apparently, the Busters bought a plot of land close to here and are going to have an apartment complex built there. Let’s move there once it’s done.”

“Sure. But take care of yourself, okay? Don’t overdo it. If you think the situation looks bad, you have to run away.”

“Yeah...”

Being an adventurer meant risking your life. Dungeon Busters had a strong emphasis on security, but we still ended up being hurt on a regular basis. Of

course, we had an endless stock of potions at hand, so small cuts and bruises weren't issues at all.

Tomorrow was the middle of Golden Week, and I had gotten a day off. *I heard that pregnant women need to get some exercise, so maybe I should take Rie to Shinozaki Park for a little walk.*



[Rank A Dungeon Abyss — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

Three hundred days had already gone by in dungeon time, and we had killed over two hundred fifty thousand ancient mages. Yet, we hadn't managed to rank up at all. We had finished exploring Floor 5, but we couldn't move forward either, stuck here. We were currently taking a break in the Safety Zone of Floor 5, and my irritation was reaching a new high.

"Why?! Why can't we rank up?" I asked.

"Aniki, let's go back to the surface. We should stop and collect ourselves for now."

"I agree," Akane added, "I may be overstepping my bounds in saying this, but I also think you need to take some time to calm down. It's possible that the current method of increasing weight and fighting continuously doesn't work for higher ranks. Please go back to the surface."

I crushed my titanium cup in my hand, and they both stopped speaking. I let out a heavy sigh before smiling.

"I'm sorry. I got a bit irritated because things didn't progress as I'd hoped they would. Akira, Akane, you're both right. Let's go back for now. We've managed to gather quite a few cards. If we roll the gacha with Rank B monster cards, we should get plenty of SR cards."

"We should also ask Shifu Liu for advice. Maybe fighting Rank B monsters isn't enough to get to Rank A. It might be more effective to go for Rank A monsters with a team of five or so B-Rankers."

"You're right," I admitted. "I can think of many possibilities, actually. We should look at the big picture here and try thinking of the best mid-to long-term

strategy.”

We decided to go back to the surface. It was early evening when we left the dungeon, and an appealing smell came from the cafeteria. *Maybe I should get drunk and spend the night with Akane. It's been a while.*

The third floor of the headquarters's main building was my home. In the middle of the night, I slipped out of the bedroom into my office and looked at the previous records I'd made. The efforts needed to go from Rank F to Rank E were nothing in comparison to what was needed to go from Rank C to Rank B. I expected that the amount needed to reach Rank A would also follow an exponential progression, but I hadn't expected it to be this hard. Back when I was Rank C, I could feel myself growing stronger in small increments until I reached the next rank. I hadn't had that feeling at all since reaching Rank B. If anything, I felt like both my body and my mental state were only getting worn down by the constant grinding.

I felt a bit sorry for Akane, as I had ended up taking it out on her tonight. She was currently asleep, thoroughly exhausted.

“Let's take a step back and think. Up until now, I've been fighting against monsters of the same rank while gradually increasing the weights I wore. If this method doesn't work, I need to think of something else.”

There was still a lot I didn't know about the dungeons. I had taken a medical examination a while ago and had been told that both my muscle density and bone density were far above the norm. My cell-division speed, skin regeneration speed, and cardio-pulmonary function were also completely inhuman. It seemed like they had even started calling people like me “high humans” in the medical world.

“It's a bit early to assume that increasing the fighting and weight loads won't work. If anything, maybe the issue is that our bodies are unable to keep up with the changes. Training, Enhancement Element, and high quantities of nutrients are needed to strengthen the body. However, we're not in a game. The process isn't instantaneous. Keeping up this lifestyle for too long is hard from a mental standpoint though. The quickest method should be...”

If the issue was the speed at which our bodies got stronger, changing the

training conditions might be the answer. Increasing the weights or the fighting time would be next to impossible. In that case, what ought to be increased was the amount of Enhancement Element that we absorbed.

“It’s a bit risky, but maybe we need to try fighting Rank A monsters...”

I’d need to discuss this with Akira and the others before making a decision, and I wanted to hear Liu Fengguang’s opinion as well. I decided to think about it some more while waiting for Rinko and the others to reach Rank B.



[Venisuela — Joker]

The pale glimmering light disappeared as a new monster was born. It was a goblin soldier, a Rank C monster. It groaned before bowing to greet me. I nodded calmly as I puffed on my cigarette. *Let’s train this one too. I’ll get it up to Rank B. Soon, my legion will be ready, and I’ll be one step closer to my ideal.*

Monster Synthesis.

That was the name of the ability held by the Legend Rare character card Mifa. Dungeon Busters and the Crusaders were working hard to clear the dungeons all on their own. What idiots. There was no need for humans to break a sweat. Might as well let the monster go at it. Although, I supposed Monster Synthesis might be a prerequisite for this strategy.

“The Oriental Republic of Sina and Gamera have both managed to get some C-Rankers of their own. Mifa, you’re really sure they’ll reach their limits soon?”

“They will. In the current situation, no one can reach Rank A. The Dungeon System’s restrictions won’t allow it. Anyone can easily get to Rank B, but to reach Rank A, they absolutely must clear a Rank B dungeon first. The same goes for Rank S...”

“Since you know, I assume the other Legend Rare characters know too, right?”

“I’m not sure,” Mifa admitted. “The 108 Pillars were all left with different memories, and we all have our own strengths and weaknesses. Our fighting skills are also on vastly different levels. I can’t fight, but I can make up for that

with my knowledge.”

I nodded after listening to Mifa’s words. Dungeon Busters and the Crusaders were kind enough to openly list the dungeons they had cleared. Apparently, they were all Rank D or Rank C dungeons. I didn’t know what the Sinese were doing, but I doubted they were quicker than Dungeon Busters. That meant the lot of them would remain stumped for a while. Now was the time to leave them in the dust and pull ahead. On top of that, they needed to clear every single dungeon. We did not. The situation was very much in our favor.

“Arnold and Josef have reached Rank C, boss.”

“Good. Let’s get started on the next step then. We’ll be working slowly towards Rank B here, inside the Rank S Dungeon Gluttony.”

“Yes, Boss!” Joker’s subordinates exclaimed in unison.

With around twenty Rank-B monsters, I should now be able to crush the troops of a single country. I’ll teach a lesson to these bastards who reshape justice as they please to suit their interests. I’ll have them know that I am justice!



[Abyss — Floor 6 — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

On the last day of Golden Week, we entered Floor 6 of Abyss. Rinko, Masayoshi, Amane, and Hisato had successfully climbed to Rank B. However, everyone had now hit a plateau, including Akane and the other Legend Rare characters. Even Liu Fengguang, our training specialist, was at a loss.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have the slightest idea why this is happening either. Us Pillars should have no trouble reaching Rank A, and yet...” Shifu Liu admitted.

My current assumption was that fighting Rank B monsters would not get us any closer to Rank A, so I had decided to move on to the next floor to fight Rank A monsters despite the risks. On Floor 6, we encountered cave trolls, Rank B monsters. They were one-eyed giants and didn’t look all that bright at first glance, but they had the brains to devise tactics while making use of their titanic strength. They even moved surprisingly fast. We were lucky they only showed up one at a time.

“Aniki, this dungeon is really different from the others,” Akira pointed out as we made our way through Floor 6.

I had noticed before he’d said anything. The pathways were wide, and the ceiling unusually high. It allowed us to have a clear view at all times and reduced the risk of being ambushed, but such an environment also gave an advantage to giants, like the cave trolls.

“Yeah, this place is totally different from Rank-B dungeons and below. Rank-A dungeons are no joke...” I whispered, starting to feel somewhat uneasy.

Dungeons of Rank A and above were given specific names. They already stood out from that fact alone. It wasn’t surprising that their structure also differed. Still, I couldn’t help but have a bad feeling, as if I was missing something really important...

“It’s coming!”

Another cave troll came charging at us. I stopped my train of thought and focused on the enemy in front of me. It was a fairly dangerous monster, but all nine of us were B-Rankers. We wouldn’t lose.

“We should be seeing the stairways to the next floor soon enough,” Shifu Liu said.

“I found it. Kazuhiko-sama, should we go down? It’s very likely that Rank A monsters will be waiting for us below,” Akane added.

“I... Hungry!” N’gie also had something to say.

We had found the stairs that led down to Floor 7, but there was no need to hurry. We took a break on Floor 6, checked everyone’s equipment, and had beef motsunabe. Our team of housewives, who had a passion for cooking, had gone through the trouble of making this masterful dish using homemade chicken bone dashi, and I couldn’t help but hum. They always prepared more than enough for us to eat, even though we had five meals a day. There was no way lack of nutrition was the reason we couldn’t rank up.

“By the way, Kazu-san, you looked deep in thought earlier. Is something wrong?” asked Hisato.

“Oh? Did I?” I asked, trying to remember.

While I somewhat remembered feeling uneasy, I couldn’t recall the reason. What had I been thinking about?

“I can’t recall. I had a feeling we missed something, but...”

“Kazuhiko-sama, I really think we should abstain from trying to fight Rank A monsters. Even with nine B-Rankers, I am not sure we would succeed...” Akane started.

“It is indeed dangerous. The gap in strength between Rank B and Rank A is tremendous. If you are the slightest bit worried, I recommend retreating. If you mess up, you may end up losing your life from a single blow,” Shifu Liu continued.

“That’s true, but... Fighting Rank B monsters is getting us nowhere. I’ve been thinking that maybe fighting Rank A monsters is the only way to reach Rank A.”

Both Akane and Shifu Liu tried to make me change my mind, which made sense. It wasn’t a safe move. But if we didn’t do anything, there was no telling when we’d be able to get to Rank A. Accepting the risk was necessary to get out of this deadlock, wasn’t it? To be honest, I also had some doubts. As the leader, though, I couldn’t let it show.

“Regardless, we sure are in a Rank A dungeon, Abyss...” Akira trailed off. “It *is* worthy of having a name. Every fight keeps us on our toes. I’m kinda excited to see the next monsters, actually!”

Akira must have wanted to make things easier for me. He put his battle-junkie tendencies forward and pretended to be excited about the upcoming fights. As Rinko and Amane let out a little laugh, I let my chopsticks fall to the floor.

“Akira, what did you just say?”

“What? Hmm, I just said I was excited, and...”

“Before that. You talked about Abyss being worthy of its name... Right?”

“I... Yeah, maybe. I think I said something like that, yes.”

“Kazuhiko-sama?”

Akane spoke up, clearly worried for me, but I motioned with my hand to hush her. I stood up and took a few steps, scratching my head.

“Why didn’t I realize it earlier? If I had just stopped to think, it would have been obvious! Akane! Shifu Liu! I need to ask you both something. Why are the dungeons of Rank A and above named?”

They exchanged a look. The rest of the members also glanced at each other. They probably hadn’t thought about this at all.

“It’s just as Akira said,” I almost screamed, before continuing to explain my thoughts as I tried to make sense of them myself. “Dungeons of Rank A and above have names. Osaka’s Rank S Dungeon is called Avaritia, right? I should have noticed when I first learned that. The second a Species Limit Breaker walked into a Rank S dungeon, the Dungeon System fully activated. That means that a person’s rank affects the dungeons they are in somehow. The Dungeon System keeps track of every single person’s rank and clearing achievements, and it also observes the rank of the dungeon that we enter. We can’t get to Rank A because we haven’t fulfilled all the necessary conditions!”

“Aniki, what do you mean by ‘conditions?’” Akira asked.

“I don’t know exactly what they are. But I think it’s a mistake to simply assume we can’t rank up because the weights we put on or the amount of Enhancement Element we absorb isn’t sufficient. We need to look at things from a broader perspective. We’re going back. Let’s check our track records in detail.”

Everyone nodded.

Akane giggled. “You’re back to being yourself, Kazuhiko-sama,” she whispered quietly, a smile on her face.





[Dungeon Busters headquarters — Ezoe Kazuhiko]

After leaving the dungeon, I called Mutsuo and the others for a meeting. I had returned Akane and the other Pillars to their card forms for the time being, but I would materialize them again if needed. I was hoping to discuss the reason we couldn't reach Rank A no matter how much we fought.

“At first, I thought that the issue might be that it wasn't possible to reach Rank A by absorbing Enhancement Element coming from Rank B monsters. But after cooling my head and considering things anew, I realized that there are actually many other possibilities. Rank A and Rank S dungeons have names. This means that these dungeons are special, and in turn, that there might also be special conditions to fulfill to get to Rank A and above. I'd like to hear everyone's thoughts on this. Any idea what the conditions could be?” I asked.

Mutsuo was the first to speak up after my preamble. He was a very talented systems engineer, but aside from that, he was extremely knowledgeable about the sub-genres and tropes found in light novels and anime. I'd even heard that he was into modern fantasy and dungeon stories these days, gobbling up books one after the other.

“I think you're onto something, Ezoe-shi. I think there must be hidden rules too. You triggered one last time after entering Osaka's Rank S Dungeon by entering it as a B-Ranker, right? I started mulling over this. I wondered if it would have been possible to avoid triggering this...”

Mutsuo stood up and wrote down dates on the whiteboard.

“Osaka Dungeon appeared at the end of July last year, right? Ezoe-shi entered it on April 8 of this year. Before that, many JSDF soldiers—including Satou Kouji, who discovered the dungeon—entered it without having any effect on the Full Activation. This was because an adventurer who carried the title of Species Limit Breaker had yet to enter, right?”

Everyone nodded. Mutsuo wrote down “Condition to trigger Full Activation: adventurer bearing the title of Species Limit Breaker enters” on the board.

“Neither Akane-shi nor Emily-shi knew about this trap,” he continued, “so

there are hidden rules that not even the Legend Rare characters are aware of. I want everyone to think about this for a minute. Don't you think it's weird? A trap like this one that can't be avoided or defused in any way just doesn't make any sense."

"Mucchii, this is real life," Akira cut in. "Doesn't it just mean that the Dungeon System is that cruel?"

"You could say that, but..." Mutsuo took in Akira's opinion but did not agree. "Ezoe-shi, I think you must have realized it too by now, but the more I analyze it, the more I come to the conclusion that the Dungeon System is fair. It has precise rules, and there is a clear way of defeating it. That's why when I first heard about that incident, my first thought was that the system must have glitched. The Dungeon System is cruel and merciless, but it isn't irrational."

"What are you trying to say, Mutsuo?"

"I think there was a way to avoid triggering Full Activation early. Specifically, I think that..."

Mutsuo wrote "Title: Rank A Dungeon Buster."

Everyone had their eyes glued to the board. I was also dumbfounded for a while, but I gradually started agreeing.

"The dungeons are constantly appraising everyone, aren't they? I think that appraisal ultimately ends up taking the form of titles. Thus, I think that if Ezoe-shi had been a Rank-A Dungeon Buster when he entered Osaka Dungeon, the trap wouldn't have been triggered."

"It's possible. No, actually, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced it must be true. I also thought that it was weird. Why does the system award titles? After all, just one look at someone like Kazuhiko-san or Akira would be more than enough to know that they're monsters well beyond the human body's limits."

"Wait, Amane-chan, calling us monsters is a bit..." Akira trailed off. "Anyway, what's the link between titles and us being unable to rank up?"

"The order..." I whispered.

“Yes, that’s what I was going for,” Mutsuo agreed.

I looked at him, silently urging him to continue explaining.

“There is no way to be certain at the moment, but I think that clearing a Rank B dungeon is a necessary condition to reaching Rank A. Clearing a Rank B dungeon must allow the buster to gain a title.”

“Rank A and Rank S are particular. That’s why only a few qualified individuals would be allowed to reach Rank A. The condition is to clear a Rank B dungeon and earn that title. The same goes for Rank S.”

“Yes. You would need to clear a Rank A dungeon to earn that title. In short, one must first clear a Rank A dungeon to reach Rank S. There are only around seventy Rank A dungeons in the world, so we need to hurry!”

“Contact the Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau at once. We need information on every Rank A dungeon. As for us, we will now be focusing on clearing Rank B dungeons. Let’s clear the Rank B dungeons in Japan as well as in neighboring countries, if possible.”

No one was smiling, but everyone nodded, serious expressions on their faces. Although we had figured things out, we weren’t in a good situation. I tried to force a smile, but the corners of my mouth only tensed.



[Republic of Woori — Seoul Special City — Blue House]

“How did we end up in such a situation?!” Park Jae-An, the president of the Republic of Woori, yelled at the Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a stern expression on his face.

The Oriental Republic of Sina, a long-time ally of Woori when it came to shunning Japan, had suddenly decided to have a “historic reunion” with Japan without so much as a warning and was now working together on dungeon-related policies. It appeared Japan had even handed them data regarding the process of raising adventurers. Sina had been able to apply this, too, as they now boasted several C-Rankers. On the other hand, the leader of the Kingdom of Ko had decided to completely cut communications at the end of last year despite Woori working on a north-south rapprochement, putting a stop to

these efforts. Even though the Gamerican army had pulled out and the timing was opportune, no progress had been made in the end.

The Kingdom of Ko had also proclaimed their support for Venisuela, claiming that they were in the right and making the situation even worse. While it was true that Woori was currently undergoing a bit of an economic recession, it was still an advanced country, part of the G20. On a personal level, President Park could understand Joker's ideas and somewhat agreed that "the ones who had money should pay up." However, public opinion would never forgive him if he dared say so aloud.

"Our relationship with Japan has been terrible since they took us off their so-called white list, and Gamerica has been distancing themselves from us more and more since we got out of the Japan-Woori General Security of Military Information Agreement—GSOMIA. Now, the Oriental Republic of Sina and Japan are seeing eye to eye, and the North officially supports Venisuela. There is no dungeon in the eastern part of the Rushian Federation, so they have been working with the West... What are we supposed to do?!"

"Mr. President, what we need right now is for you to make a decision. What course of action do you plan to take?"

Depending on one's outlook on the situation, one could say that Woori was currently faced with a great opportunity. Gamerican troops pulling out meant that a chance for the people to use their right to self-determination had finally come, a hundred years after the fall of the Empire of Ko. On the other hand, if the government didn't play their cards right, they might end up in a situation in which no foreign country took them seriously, just like one hundred years ago.

"Perhaps we should mend our relationship with Japan."

"No. The people wouldn't forgive us. We need to focus on Gamerica first. The elections are approaching, which means Howard must be desperate for some achievements. If we offer to negotiate import taxes or relocate some factories, he should be interested."

"The same goes for the Sinese President. He decided to make peace with Japan, but who knows if the people will accept such a U-turn easily."

As the heated argument continued, the only man in the Park administration

that could be called an expert on Japan, Prime Minister Lee, tilted his head to the side as he sought confirmation.

“There’s something I would like to check with everyone,” Prime Minister Lee said. “What is the point of trying to negotiate with Gamera or get closer to Sina? Are we to play house together? We are an independent country. We should stand on our own two feet and confidently assert our intentions. If we don’t even have a will of our own, who will take us seriously on the international scene?”

“We might end up being isolated!”

“This is not a means of isolation. We’d be in a situation where no one protects us, but at the same time, it would be a situation where no one makes decisions for us. This is called independence. We should first take a stand, and *then* seek the understanding of foreign countries,” declared Prime Minister Lee.

Everyone stayed silent after listening to Prime Minister Lee’s sound reasoning. It had been approximately ten months since dungeons had first started appearing and a month since Joker had caused mayhem in Venisuela. Every country was devising policies while affirming their position on the international scene. Woori couldn’t delay any longer.

“I promised to get rid of the deep-rooted evil of society when I became president. The Venisuelan President has also been taking a similar stance. This could lead to reconciliation with the Kingdom of Ko...”

“Mr. President! You can’t do this! If we go down this path, we will lose all credibility with the rest of the world!” Prime Minister Lee’s face was white as a sheet as he tried to stop the president.

Deep within his heart, he wondered if the president had gone crazy. He should be thinking about Woori’s future, figuring out a way to get rid of the dungeons, and stabilizing the economy. This wasn’t the time to spout out idealistic concepts, ponder economic democracy, or discuss a near-perfect society where “everyone could enjoy a plentiful lifestyle.”

“I will try to get in touch with the North once more. I’ll make the trip to Pyongyang myself, if need be,” the president said.

Prime Minister Lee looked at the sky in despair.



[Ministry of Defense — Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Bureau — Ishihara Yukie]

When I heard there was a limit to ranking up, I lost all hope. As I listened to the full explanation, however, I started thinking it made sense.

Dungeon Busters had decided to set their sights on the dungeon situated in Hyakunincho, Shinjuku City before trying to clear the Rank A dungeon Abyss.

We were hoping to get rid of every dungeon in the Kanto area before the Olympics started on July 24. The marathon was set to be held in Sapporo. That area had already been purged of dungeons, so there'd be no problem on that side, but...

"We shouldn't publicize this. If it is true that only by clearing a Rank B dungeon can busters reach Rank A, clearing the dungeons will be even harder than we expected. This will just make everyone more anxious."

"It's still only a theory for now," Ezoë said. "We'll clear Shinjuku Dungeon to confirm it, but we still need to start making preparations for the future. I'd like you to find out the location of every Rank B and Rank A dungeon. There should be plenty in the Oriental Republic of Sina and the rest of Southeast Asia."

"I'll have the Ministry of Foreign Affairs contact our ambassadors all over the world. I'll set it up as an exchange of information regarding the dungeons. If your theory is right, only sixty-six people can reach Rank S. These people will have to take on the role of clearing the seven Rank S dungeons. Raising Rank A adventurers will be of the greatest importance."

I took out an A3-sized map of Japan on which twelve dungeons, as well as their estimated ranks, were marked. The dungeons were in Sapporo, Sendai, Shinjuku, Shishibone, Funabashi, Kanazawa, Nagoya, Osaka, Hiroshima, Hakata, and Miyakonojo.

"These are estimations based on the strength of the monsters on Floor 1 of each dungeon, but Sendai, Shinjuku, Hiroshima, and Miyakonojo should be Rank B. I'll let you handle them. We have also received a request from the

Republic of Sina to help them clear some dungeons. One is located in New Taipei, the other one in Kaohsiung City. The Republic of Sina isn't part of the UN, so they haven't been able to join the IDAO either. It's a pretty convenient place for your first assignment abroad, don't you think?"

"Won't the Oriental Republic of Sina interfere? They've been quite insistent about their One-Sina policy. Won't they say they need to protect their sovereignty and protest?"

"They won't. Keep this quiet, but the Sinese government has already given their approval. They will be reaching out to Dungeon Busters directly, after all. In theory, it will be the same as when you worked with the Vatican. While the Japanese government recommends you, technically, we are completely unrelated to the actual dealings you have with them. The Oriental Republic of Sina will surely publish a press release expressing their disapproval, but they won't do anything more."

"What about the Oriental Republic of Sina and the Republic of Bharatas?" Ezoë asked. "These two countries make up a quarter of Earth's population, so they must also have a proportional number of dungeons. They're both part of the IDAO, but I expect they won't react kindly if foreigners try to clear their dungeons."

Indeed. The Oriental Republic of Sina had a population of 1.4 billion, and the Republic of Bharatas 1.3 billion... Our ability to avoid the Monster Stampede would greatly depend on whether we managed to clear the dungeons of these two countries. Put together, the superficies of these two countries came up to a staggering thirteen million square kilometers and more than two hundred twenty dungeons had already been found. At least two hundred and fifty dungeons should have appeared, considering the relative populations of the two countries, and naturally, some dungeons were yet to be located.

"They have already publicly declared they would welcome Japan's help. But to be honest, this stance was prompted by the sheer number of dungeons in their territories. They can't manage them all. We've been able to seal off every dungeon in Japan and fully operate them. The Oriental Republic of Sina and the Republic of Bharatas do not have the time nor the funds for that. On top of that, both of these countries have been going through rapid economic growth,

which means wealth inequality is severe and worsening by the day. Some of their citizens sympathize with Joker as a result, and protests are becoming frequent.”

I heard Ezo click his tongue. Approximately half a year had passed since I had first met this man at the end of last year, and I could see he was gradually losing his composure. While we were making progress with the dungeons themselves, the general world situation was worsening at a much quicker pace. I figured that now was the time to bring up a lighter topic.

“I also have some good news. Gamera has finally decided to change its stance. They’re considering joining the IDAO.”

“Are they? I can’t picture that ‘Gamera First!’ old man suddenly changing his mind though.”

“Howard’s isolationism has been heavily criticized all over the world. As things stand, he may not even get chosen to represent his party at the Republican primary in August. If he doesn’t make an effort to align his dungeon policies with the rest of the world’s at the very least, the Democrats may very well end up ruling the country next. He probably realized this.”

“The Democrats are currently busy with infighting, right? The three candidates are the former vice president, a woman in the Senate, and a mayor, if I remember correctly.”

“The one who’s been garnering the most support recently is the third one you brought up, Peter Wozniak. The former vice president is seventy-seven while the senator is seventy-one years old. No one would usually bat an eye at their ages, but it seems like they might have health issues. More and more young people are also starting to agree with Wozniak’s stance that their previous political experience will only end up being a burden in the face of a new threat, such as the dungeons.”

“He’s thirty-eight, and his net worth is around one hundred thousand dollars. He’s the poorest candidate in history. Wasn’t his slogan made to echo Howard’s? Something like...”

“Make Gamera Decent Again.”

Ezoe shrugged before bursting into laughter. He didn't seem to care much about the presidential election. To him, Gamera didn't have much more value than being a good source of information on the dungeons' locations. Regardless, it would be a great help for us if Gamera joined the IDAO. Perhaps it would even prompt a certain country located on a peninsula in the northwest to change its behavior.

"Let's handle matters here first," Ezoe said. "We'll clear every B-Rank dungeon in the country. During that time, I would like you to get as much information on the dungeons in Asian countries as you can."

"Got it."

He seemed to be feeling a little better. Seeing Ezoe smile also made me feel more at ease myself. After all, no one would be able to stop him if he lost control. I wondered for a while if I should advise him to take a few days off.



[Dainippon Pharmaceutical Manufacturing — Samejima Kensuke]

It had been four months since I'd followed my company's order to become an adventurer. Since one hour outside the dungeons was more or less six days inside them, I did not go dungeon diving every day. The company probably wished I would dive inside the dungeon every day and then come to work on top of that, of course, but the labor union would never let them get away with that. In the end, I and the other members of Team DPM entered the dungeons twice a week at the most. We sold the magic stones we mined and used all the monster cards to gacha, though our company took custody of every potion-related card.

We didn't need to do anything else and still received a full salary, so it was a rather easy job. We even got some perks.

"What? There are even love potions?!"

Very rarely, the gacha would give Uncommon cards. Last time, I'd brought a High Potion back to the office and had gotten a bonus. I should've rolled the equipment or weapon gacha from time to time too, but I was hoping to get more High Potions and used up all my cards on the item gacha.

To be fair, a Rank C knife was more than enough to fight the monsters on the first floor of Yokohama Dungeon.

Name: Love Potion

Rarity: Uncommon

Description: Add one drop of your blood to this liquid before having the target of your affections drink it. They will instantaneously fall madly in love with you.

“This is way too good! I should go hang out in Roppongi tonight!”

There was a certain cabaret club in Roppongi where you could drink with AV actresses. Among these girls was one who was especially famous. If I could get her to drink this, I was sure to have a great time.

I materialized the potion immediately and cut myself slightly with my knife before dropping some blood into the liquid. As I put the bottle in my pocket, someone came to bicker with me.

“Hey! Are you sure you can do this? Don’t you need special authorization to use a dungeon item above ground?”

I clicked my tongue reflexively. What a dumb guy. If no one opened their mouth, how would they even know? We were fighting nonstop in a dimly lit cave. Didn’t we deserve some comfort after all that?

“Don’t be stingy. I’m only going to have a little fun,” I said.

I decided to ignore my colleague and go back to the surface. I delivered the magic stones I had gathered and showed my cards. Of course, I left the love potion nicely tucked in my pocket.

“Is this everything you brought out from the dungeon? If you have obtained any other item, please show it to us.”

“Yes, this is everything.”

Even though I said “this is everything,” the love potion was on the counter before I understood what had happened. *Why?! Why did I take it out when I wanted to hide it?*

The beautiful receptionist didn't seem to care about my state of confusion and gazed coolly at the love potion. Finally, she called her boss.

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?!"

My team members were panicking too.

"The hell if I know! My hand just moved on its own!" I yelled, trying to explain myself.

After a while, a muscular guy wearing the uniform of the JSDF appeared. He picked up the bottle and sneered at me.

"That's one of the forbidden items, Love Potion. Two weeks ago, another guy tried to bring one of these to the surface too. Too bad for you, but you can't cheat your way out of our checkpoints. Anyway, you committed a violation of the Adventurer Code. You're going to have to follow me to another room for a while."

"Human trash," the receptionist spat out, looking at me coldly.



[European Union Dungeon Adventurer Administrative Agency — Reich Branch]

"These scum are everywhere," Alberta, one of the members of the Crusaders, stated with contempt as she read the morning newspaper, a cup of coffee in hand.

The article was about a man who had been caught trying to sneak a forbidden card out of a dungeon situated in the suburbs of Berlin. The card he had tried to hide was called "One Night of Passion," which allowed the user to make a person of the opposite sex their captive for one night. The receptionist outside of the dungeon had immediately caught on, and the man had been arrested.

Rolf, the leader of the Crusaders, nodded. "We all sign a Jointly Sealed Covenant," he added. "The effect only applies right after coming out of the dungeon, but everyone is bound by the covenant to tell the receptionist the truth regardless of their will. I was a bit skeptical about forcing such a contract on innocent people at first, but it seems Herr Ezoë was right to be cautious in

the end.”

“Even we were made to sign it.” Marco sighed before continuing with a laugh. “Makes you wonder if the IDAO has an infinite supply of Covenants. I heard they got them from the Busters... Do those guys spend their days rolling the card slot?”

Everyone agreed. At this point, UC cards weren’t a rare sight for the Crusaders anymore, but the sheer number of cards held by Dungeon Busters was still incredible. It meant they were constantly defeating heaps of monsters. At the same time, it also meant that they were faced with a proportional amount of temptation and anguish.

“We’ve been receiving our fair share of offers as well, after all. The whole chain of the distribution of goods would be transformed in an instant if someone were to put Other-Dimensional Pouches on the market. On the other hand, it would make smuggling drugs or illegal weapons that much easier. The same goes for potions. Basic potions that only heal are okay, but it’s only natural for the rest to be tightly restricted.”

“Sadly, not everyone is full of good intentions. It is only human to succumb to temptation, but we have been blessed with faith so that we may resist such temptations,” the pious Léonard said. “Now that we are done with breakfast, let us pray together,” he urged.

The other members exchanged looks and restrained a little laugh but still stood up. After all, they were still the Crusaders, the army of God.



[Aichi Prefecture, Nagoya City — Imaike 1-*chome*]

I, Satou Souta, was a civilian adventurer. I had only one objective as an adventurer: clearing Osaka Dungeon. My old man was a police officer who lost his life while investigating Osaka Dungeon.

At first, no one believed in the existence of dungeons, myself included. When we came to realize they were real, however, I felt an intense rage well up inside me. Why did they have to appear on July 30?! Why not on the twenty-ninth or the thirty-first? My old man would’ve been off duty those days. He wouldn’t

have died.

“Damn... I missed again.”

I was currently alone inside Nagoya Dungeon—which was situated in Imaike, Nagoya City—fighting hobkobolds on Floor 3 with the UC weapon middle sword. Hobkobolds were Rank D monsters around 1.8 meters tall that fought with a sword, just as I did. I tried to finish one of them in one blow, aiming a strike at its weak spot, but it dodged and swung its sword in retaliation. If I hadn’t had a shield, I might have died on the spot.

<Buster>

This word was written on my civilian adventurer license. Us busters were allowed to enter the dungeons and stay inside for as long as we wished. However, we had to gather set amounts of cards and magic stones. In other words, we needed to show our resolve.

I didn’t really care about any of that, to be honest. For now, all I cared about was fighting. I had the authorization to use a Magic Pouch, so I stuffed it with enough food and water for two weeks. When I was tired, I would head to the Safety Zone, take out my sleeping bag, and rest for a bit before going back to slaughter monsters, keeping at it until my supplies ran out.

“Haa...! Haa...!”

I had just returned to the Safety Zone and taken a big gulp of water before removing the weights I constantly carried. I knew my way of training was unreasonable. However, I had watched Dungeon Busters’s videos, and according to them, it was impossible to become Rank C unless you did at least that much. From what they said, I’d finally reach Rank C if I kept this up until I had defeated over one hundred fifty thousand monsters.

“All right, time for some food...”

I ate a pack of emergency ration rice along with dried vegetable soup and a ready-made pack of beef stew. I then proceeded to brush my teeth and dump a bucket of water over my head, wiping my body to get rid of the filth. It had been two weeks since I’d entered the dungeon, and I hadn’t bathed at all. I was starting to stink for real. I wouldn’t be able to act this way if I didn’t train alone.

I lay down in bed and immediately fell asleep.

“Tomorrow... Must reach Rank C...”

After waking up, I relieved myself and had breakfast before heading out to fight. I had no idea how many monsters I had killed by now. I just fought, fought, fought. It was always hard at first, but I’d feel lighter after a while, and fighting almost started feeling good. Once I reached that state, I could go on forever.

After three hours, my alarm rang, and I stopped my hand. I felt like I could still go on, but I knew it was only an impression. The video had also warned prospective adventurers about this. Setting an alarm was a necessity as keeping this up too long could mean death. As soon as I stopped, the pleasant feeling disappeared, only to be replaced by a stifling feeling and acute exhaustion.

I leaned against the wall and checked my status.

Name: Satou Souta

Title: Species Limit Breaker

Rank: C

Possession Limit: 32 / 32

Skills: Card Gacha (3), Sword Mastery (Lvl. 5), Unarmed Mastery (Lvl. 5),
Tenacity

“Heh heh... Heh heh heh heh!”

I had finally reached Rank C. My last skill slot had been filled with the skill Tenacity. Somehow, it did not have a level. I didn’t know what kind of effect it had, but I sure liked the sound of it. *Yeah, I won’t give up. I will clear Osaka Dungeon, even if I have to do it alone.*

I decided to go back to the Safety Zone for a little break. As I did so, I suddenly heard a voice calling me.

“Oh my! Are you alone?”

“WAAAAAH!!!”

I jumped, a bit freaked out, and readied my sword. I finally noticed a dark-haired woman who seemed to be around twenty-five, sitting on the floor. *What the...?! We're on Floor 3 of Nagoya Dungeon! Unless she's a member of Dungeon Busters, it makes no sense for another adventurer to be here!*

“Why hello! I’m Rita, a peddler who travels through the dungeons. I hope we will forge a long-lasting relationship... Ni hi hi!”

Who the hell is this woman?! At the very least, she didn’t seem like she had bad intentions. I put down my sword and the woman—Rita—pulled out a card.

“I’m sorry for surprising you that badly. I’m a peddler. My job is to exchange cards with adventurers. You look like you’ve just ranked up. Were you going to go gather cards? I would be happy to exchange cards with you once you accumulate enough of them. For now, I’d like to give you a little gift to celebrate our new friendship. Please accept it.”

Name: Unlimited Card Holder

Rarity: Super Rare

Description: A card holder that can store an unlimited number of cards. Thanks to its effect, you will be freed from the card possession limit.

Once I went over my possession limit of thirty-two, monsters stopped dropping cards altogether. I had decided to fight without paying too much attention to this but with this item, I’d be able to gather cards much more easily. I stared at the card’s description for a while, astonished. When I raised my head to thank her, Rita had already disappeared.



[United States of Gamera — National News Network]

<We are now on the verge of the primaries for both parties, the last step before the 2020 presidential election, and the list of candidates is being narrowed down. On the Republican side, our current president, Ronald Howard, is naturally the front-runner, but Michael Field, the former governor, has recently declared he will also run for president. We’re expecting a close contest between the two candidates. On the Democratic side, the confusion that

resulted from the many candidacies seems to have died down, and three main candidates have emerged.>

<The three Democratic candidates are Senator Elizabeth Sarandon, Former Vice President Jonathan Byron, and Mayor Peter Wozniak. While Mrs. Sarandon has been noticed for her radical left-wing positions, Mr. Byron and Mr. Wozniak are both rather moderate.>

<The most crucial issue of this presidency is, of course, the direction our country will take in regards to the dungeons. Japan, the Oriental Republic of Sina, and the EU are strengthening their collaboration as their adventurers share information and promote communication. While President Howard is still pushing the idea that Gamerican dungeons belong solely to Gamerica and is still being cautious towards the IDAO, the three Democratic candidates are all in favor of joining the IDAO and reinforcing a collaborative relationship with the rest of the world. We can further observe several differences in the specifics of their programs.>

<Mrs. Sarandon has declared she wants to bring about a more just and freer world, intending to pursue diplomatic ties with Venisuela. She is in favor of the G20 countries funding an initiative to offer equal education opportunities all over the world. In a recent debate, Mr. Byron stated that Mrs. Sarandon's views were "utterly absurd," leading to a fierce debate between the two candidates.>

<On the other hand, Mr. Byron, who hasn't hesitated to criticize Mrs. Sarandon, hasn't offered much to the debate. Put nicely, his plan appears reasonable, but it critically lacks substance. He has spoken in favor of joining the IDAO and having our country actively participate in information exchange. Since Japan has long taken the lead as the foremost provider of information on the dungeons, many are worried Gamerica will end up losing its global leadership by sticking to such weak policies.>

<Finally, Mr. Wozniak's views are quite distinctive and vary greatly from Mrs. Sarandon's. He wants to invite Japan's Dungeon Busters and the EU's Dungeon Crusaders to train a team of civilian adventurers specialized in mining black stones and hopes they'll accept. He will request that they conjointly clear thirty-one of Gamerica's dungeons as well. He has also spoken in favor of dispatching our troops abroad again to act as a deterrent in sensitive areas. Finally, he has

warned about the risks of terrorist attacks and calls for our border security to be strengthened. He has been faced with some criticism over his plan to allow foreign associations to clear Gamerican dungeons, but many have praised his realistic views due to the instability in many areas where the Gamerican army withdrew.>

<Mr. Byron is currently in the lead, but Mr. Wozniak is steadily catching up. The results of the Democratic Party’s presidential primaries coming up this July are impossible to predict. At any rate, the upcoming presidential election will have a historic impact on the fate of our country and the world, and an unprecedented voter turnout is expected.>



[Hyakunincho, Shinjuku City, Tokyo — Shokuan-Dori]

Hyakunincho, located in Shinjuku City, Tokyo, was a historic area that dated back to the Edo period. At the beginning of the period, an organization called Hyakunin-gumi, composed of several groups of one hundred men armed with muskets, was formed to protect and regulate the city. The area in which one of these groups, the Iga-gumi, had its residence became known as Hyakunincho. Nowadays, this was a flourishing place situated right between the Yamanote Line Station Shin-Okubo and the Sobu Line Station. Shin-Okubo was famous for being Tokyo’s Woorian Town.

Hyakunincho became Tokyo’s Woorian Town shortly after the end of the Pacific War. In 1950, a group of Zainichi Woorians established a confectionery company in Okubo. After that, refugees from the Woorian War who had sought asylum in Japan gathered in Okubo, hoping to find employment, and Tokyo’s Woorian town was born.

Woori went through a gradual process of internationalization and globalization, allowing Woorians to freely go to Japan for tourism. In turn, this trend influenced the inhabitants of other Asian countries to move to Japan, all of whom gathered in Okubo as well. As a result, many ethnic restaurants could be found in the area. The popularity of the so-called Woorian wave started drawing many young Japanese to this neighborhood at the beginning of the twenty-first century. At the same time, irreconcilable differences in the

understanding of Japan and Woori's history made this area a target for anti-Woorian demonstrations, and Woorian shops went through several waves of success and ruin in accordance with the overall political climate.

Although the area didn't enjoy as much popularity as it once had, the path going from Shokuan-Dori to Okubo-Dori was currently filled with not only Woorian restaurants and W-POP shops managed by Zainichi Woorians, but also halal food stores and other establishments targeted at the Muslim community. It was a plentiful and resolutely international neighborhood.

* * *

"The dungeon's here, huh...? It's my first time in the area."

Shokuan-Dori came into view after going from Keiyou Street to Yasukuni-Dori to Akebonobashi and, finally, passing through Higashi-Shinjuku. I could see several discount stores on the right. We were at the entrance of Tokyo's biggest Woorian Town. Dozens of Woorian shops were neatly lined up along the four-meter-wide street, nicknamed "Pretty Boys Street," that led to Okubo-Dori.

I stopped the car in a parking lot and crossed the street. I could see a restaurant that specialized in innards on my right before I entered Pretty Boys Street. A few years ago, the place would have been brimming with Zainichi Woorians and young Japanese people, but it wasn't as bustling as I had imagined now that I saw it with my own two eyes.

"Ever since President Park took office, Woori-Japan relationships have been deteriorating incredibly fast. On top of that, the Woorian economy is at its worst, and they haven't been tackling the dungeon issue at all. Being anti-Woorian has become the norm in Japan recently. Perhaps this street won't ever go back to its previous state," Kiriara Amare explained, looking sadly at the shops on both sides of the road.

Amare seemed to be very much into the Woorian wave and had extensive knowledge about Woorian dramas and cosmetics. I had never really watched Woorian dramas, but I knew Summer Sonata was a thing at the very least. To be fair, I didn't really watch Japanese dramas either...

"Now that I think about it, I saw a special program about Woorian fried chicken on Tokyo TV's WBN. Might as well take the chance to have some."

“Oh my, I took you for quite the anti-Woorian, Kazuhiko-san,” Amane said as she threw a sideways glance my way.

I must have been doing something wrong during my press conferences, as everyone seemed to think I was a conservative and hated Woori... I figured that now was a good time to set the record straight. I took my phone out of my pocket.

“Here’s my phone. It’s a Galaxy, see? I also have a Woorian TV at home, and one of my closest friends is a Zainichi Woorian. I eat tons of kimchi during the winter. Ah, my car’s Japanese though. I’m not trying to criticize people who hate everything Woorian, but I’m not like that. My only issue is with the Woorian government—more specifically, their stance on dungeons. I don’t intend to reject entire Woorian industries because I don’t like the government’s policies. I don’t care where a product’s from if it’s good.”

“You’re a realist like always, Aniki. You’ll use good stuff regardless of where it’s from, and you’ll throw away anything useless, even if the product’s Japanese. Most of the camping equipment we use at Dungeon Busters ended up being Japanese as a result though.”

One of the sectors that had profited the most from the rise of civilian adventurers was the outdoor goods sector. The tents, sleeping bags, lanterns, gas burners, tables, and chairs we used were all manufactured in Japan. If you ignored the price for a moment, Japanese products were undoubtedly the best in the world. We made a point to introduce all of the items we used in our videos, and the makers had apparently been receiving more and more orders not only from inside the country but also from abroad.

“Gamerican products aren’t bad either, but for similar quality products, I’d still pick the Japanese one in the end. I do that not only for tools but for food as well. My reasoning’s quite simple. If the Monster Stampede ends up happening, the world will end up splitting into separate parts. If we consider national safety our priority, we should be upping the country’s ability to be self-sufficient. We’re high-earners, so we should spend as much as we can to return money to our industries.”

We arrived at our destination while I was talking. It was a park called Nishi-

Okubo Park, right outside of Pretty Boys Street. The dungeon had appeared on a square in the southern part of the rather long and narrow park.

“Hmm? What’s going on?”

People were gathered at the park’s entrance, yelling something. I thought we had run into another group of adventurers. After a while, though, I realized they weren’t civilian adventurers but rather some sort of activists.

“Only allowing Japanese citizens to enter the dungeons is discrimination!”

“Protect the rights of the people who are forced to live in Japan!”

“Urabe must resign at once!”

Around twenty men and women were shouting these kinds of slogans. I had nothing against political activism, but I wished people would consider the trouble they caused others. We couldn’t enter the park. I was thinking about how jealous I was of people with that much free time on their hands when they noticed us and set their sights on us.

“Dungeon... Busters?!”

The crowd separated, leaving a path in the middle. *Nice. Now we can go in*, or so I thought. Just one second later, someone started screaming.

“Racists! Go home!”

“Excuse me?”

I reflexively turned to face the person. It was a woman of around twenty. She seemed scared for a moment but continued screaming all the same after a few seconds.

“Are you not ashamed of yourselves?! Entering the dungeon right now means that you’re supporting Urabe’s discriminatory policies! You’re a racist organization!”

“She’s right! Japan’s dungeon policies are all wrong! We live in Japan and pay our taxes in Japan! We should have just as much of a right to become adventurers as Japanese citizens!”

I decided to ignore them, said nothing, and kept on walking. Only allowing

Japanese citizens to register as civilian adventurers in Japan wasn't discrimination. It was simply a way to categorize things. After all, Gamergian people or French people couldn't register in Japan either.

Even if I said that, they wouldn't understand. I had been in the workforce for almost twenty years, and by now, I knew that some people confused ideas and beliefs. They'd insist that their purely emotional and subjective ideas were one hundred percent right; the way their brains worked being pretty much the same as those of religious people. Trying to argue with people like them was useless.

"The way home is going to be annoying. Too bad. I wanted to have some Woorian chicken and cheese dakgalbi to celebrate."

"I know a place close to here! It's the first restaurant of a chain managed by some famous Woorian entertainers to open in Japan. I love their green chili pepper chicken. You should try it."

"Can the two of you stop discussing food when we're about to enter a dungeon?" Rinko asked, glaring at us.

I'm looking forward to when we finish clearing this dungeon.

We entered the park after passing through a checkpoint protected by four members of the JSDF. The whole park had been closed off, and facilities such as the swings had been removed to make room for a two-story building meant to serve as an information desk for adventurers.

"We have been awaiting you, Dungeon Busters," a woman said.

The receptionist was wearing some sort of black medieval suit—or *was it?*—that you'd never expect to see nowadays. I heard this outfit had been picked for the sake of making the receptionists look more like the real deal. A panel of experts had decided on it, backed by hundreds of people.

"The guild's receptionists are the real stars of fantasy novels! They can't be wearing camouflage clothes!" Mutsuo had been pretty adamant when we had talked about it.

To be honest, I didn't get it one bit.

"Other adventurers are currently inside the dungeon. They should come out

in about forty minutes, at most, so please wait until then.”

“While we wait, tell me about this dungeon. I want to know the structure, the monsters that appear, the size of the magic stones, and the location of the Safety Zone.”

Akira, Rinko, Amane, Masayoshi, Hisato, and I were taken to another room to receive an explanation of the specifics of this dungeon. Akira and the others flipped through the pages of information we’d gotten and exchanged a look.

“Hmm? It’s my first time seeing this monster. Do you guys know about it?” I asked.

“Aniki...” Akira trailed off. “You’re the weird one for being Japanese and not knowing about it. It’s super well-known.”

Name: Drocky
Title: None
Rank: F
Rarity: Common
Skills: Flight (Lvl. 1), _____

“No matter how you look at it, that’s a Dr*cky from Dr*g*n Qu*st.”

“It hovers, thanks to the little wings on its back, and often makes sharp turns. It bites to attack, so it should be easy to defeat as long as we pay attention to the space around us. There’s also some information on Floor 2. The monsters that appear there are called Poison Slime. They’re Rank E.”

Name: Poison Slime
Title: None
Rank: E
Rarity: Common
Skills: Toxic Blow (Lvl. 1), _____

The other five seemed to be at a loss for words. I did think that these monsters looked a bit cartoonish, but I had always assumed such monsters would eventually appear. My members, on the other hand, looked like they couldn't believe their eyes.

"Aniki, you really don't know them?! These monsters are right out of a game."

Tuuuu tulu tululu... Akira hummed the game's melody.

"Hey! I'm a guy in my forties! Of course I know that Dr*g*n Qu*st game. I even played it. It's just that I only played the first one," I said.

"Then you should know about them! Dr*ckies were there from the very first one!"

"All right. One of my clients had a game company, and I thought the topic might come up, so I decided to download the game on my cellphone. Some pompous self-proclaimed king suddenly ordered me to kill some guys. It pissed me off, so I closed the game after around one minute. Who would even say yes? He doesn't make you sign a contract, doesn't specify your payment..."

"Aniki... It's a game..." Akira laughed, looking a bit exasperated.

I stopped talking and turned my attention back to the documents at hand.

This is strange. Why do game characters appear as monsters in our world? It's the same as the gacha system and the skills. Is the Dungeon System learning about our world and making up new monsters based on that? But why?

The System keeps on destroying worlds one after the other, so the destruction itself can't be its goal. It's trying to accomplish something. It didn't succeed, so the worlds were destroyed as a result. In the past, I assumed that the System's goal might be to make humanity evolve. But what would be the point?

"Kazu-san, are you okay?"

I came back to myself with Hisato's call. I'd think about the Dungeon System later. For now, I needed to confirm something. I put my deductions on hold.

As soon as we entered Shinjuku Dungeon, I materialized Akane. She calmly analyzed the monsters that had appeared in front of us.

"Drockies, right? They can fly, but they're extremely weak, so they are only

Rank F,” Akane said.

“How do you know this?” I said after a while, staring at her.

“Kazuhiko-sama?”

Perhaps she felt a bit bothered by my insistent gaze, but Akane put on a serious face. It must have been the first time I looked at her with suspicion in my eyes.

“Akane, this drocky monster shouldn’t have existed in the previous worlds you were in. It’s been modeled after a character from a game created here, in this world. The Dungeon System just copied it. There’s no way it exists in other worlds, so how do you know about it?”

“Well... Even if you ask me that...”

I left Akane to her thoughts and materialized Emily, Shifu Liu, and N’gie. I asked them the same question. Emily and N’gie had never heard of drockies, but Shifu Liu had.

“I’m not doubting you,” I said. “But I’m now certain that your memories are being altered and controlled at will by the Dungeon System. It probably decided what memories to give you when the dungeons appeared on Earth. This brings us to another issue: the reliefs. You guys think that they must be important, and they make you uncomfortable, but we should assume that these feelings have been ingrained in you by the Dungeon System.”

“Aniki, are you saying that Anego and the others aren’t trustworthy?” Akira asked.

“Of course they are. They’ve saved us hundreds of times in the past, and they’re still doing their best for us. I just realized all over again that the Legend Rare characters are also a part of the Dungeon System. I trust them, but that doesn’t mean I can blindly believe everything they say. What is the role of the 108 pillars in the first place? If the Dungeon System tasked them with helping and rescuing the people who dive into dungeons, what is its goal? As long as we don’t understand that, I can’t allow myself to trust them fully.”

Akira, Rinko, and the others looked at each other, silent. Someone cleared their throat. It was Shifu Liu.

“You’re right. Us Pillars exist to aid the busters. But I’m afraid that, although I know our purpose, I don’t know why we were given that purpose nor why we exist. Only a complete idiot would blindly put their full trust in us under these conditions. You have to stay on your guard, even if it means being wary of us.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized after a pause. “But I do trust you, and I rely on you. These are my honest feelings. Akane, I’m really sorry. Let’s have a change of pace. It’s a bit early, but we should head to the Safety Zone and have a lunch break.”

Akira wore a dark expression. I wanted to do something about the gloomy atmosphere. We had plenty of time, so I figured having a barbecue with the wagyu beef I’d brought along with some nonalcoholic beer might be a good idea.



[Republic of Colombian — Capital City, Bogota]

The Republic of Colombian was a country of forty-nine million people in northwestern South America that had the continent’s third-largest economy. Due to a lack of information, the image of Colombian in the mind of the average Japanese person stopped in the 1990s. In a nutshell, they pictured Colombian as some poor and unsafe country, rife with corrupt politicians and drug-dealing mafias, and ravaged by civil war.

During the first half of the 1990s, this image wasn’t all that far off from reality. However, Colombian had changed drastically at the turn of the century. The drug cartels had been mostly destroyed, and the far-left revolutionary army that had been the source of the civil war also gradually disappeared. As a result, corruption had been mostly eradicated as well. Its large population and cheap labor cost made it a promising place for investments.

When it came to Colombian, the first thing that most people thought about was coffee, but that was also an old misconception. Nowadays, Colombian industry was more focused on mining and manufacturing goods than it was on growing coffee plants. In 2002, President Ayara came to power and managed to turn over a new leaf for the country in only eight years by relying on a delicate balance of populism and pragmatic measures. His achievements were still

heavily discussed nowadays, and he had as many admirers as critics, but everyone agreed that he had accomplished something big by bringing back order. At the time, the value of coffee had fallen, causing the economy to plummet. Mafias and guerrilla movements were everywhere, but Ayara had managed to revamp the economy. He maintained an economic growth of over seven percent, getting national finances back into shape.

President Nicolai, who had taken office after him, had succeeded in achieving peace with the guerrilla organizations and continued to make Colombian into a country that no longer had anything to do with its former self.

Luis Sarmiento became the president in 2018. His election overlapped with troubled times in the neighboring country of Venisuela, and Colombian ended up welcoming over a million Venisuelan refugees. This situation, along with the wide wealth gap that naturally accompanied rapid economic growth, brought left-wing guerilla groups back to the country. To top it all off, dungeons started emerging, adding to the chaos.

From 2002 onward, Colombian had been blessed with two outstanding presidents with excellent political abilities. The time had now come for their successor to prove himself.

In the La Candelaria area, at the heart of Bogota, stood the Plaza Bolívar. If you went south from there, you would first walk by the National Capitol before reaching the Office of the President.

Today, President Sarmiento was attending a Security Council meeting. The main topic at hand was national security in the face of dungeons and Venisuela.

“Our army’s first, second, and fourth divisions are currently assigned to border security. The sixth division is stationed in Vichada. The Venisuelan army has yet to make a move, but the flow of refugees hasn’t stopped. The refugee camps of Santa Marta and Cúcuta are at their breaking point. We haven’t been able to confirm it yet, but we suspect some refugees are joining armed guerilla groups. We need to stay alert.”

“On the other hand, the dungeons are not a pressing issue anymore. Two in Bogota, one in Medellín, and another in Cali have appeared, but our army has successfully sealed them off. We should see no casualties due to them for the

time being.”

“As expected, our biggest problem is the refugees. If we don’t find a way to deal with the two million refugees who have entered the country, we will soon have our hands full with riots. That being said, we can’t afford to fully welcome them and give them citizenship in our current economic situation. We may have no other choice but to ask Gameraica for assistance...”

The ministers all seemed to be at a loss.

“Perhaps we should recruit adventurers from the refugees,” the president offered.

At the moment, Colombian had yet to put an adventurer system in place. The main reason was the lack of funds to get the initiative going. Administrative buildings needed to be installed around the dungeons before magic stones could be mined. Basic equipment, such as protective clothes and safety boots, had to be prepared, and boot camps to screen candidates had to be held. Japan had provided some guidelines on how to proceed, but Colombian still lacked the funds and manpower to put these suggestions in place.

“Mr. President, I believe this might be a bit difficult... Only Japan and the EU have managed to launch successful dungeon adventurer initiatives. The Oriental Republic of Sina and the Democratic Republic of Bharataria have tried, but many problems seem to have arisen because of management issues. Above all, we lack the funds to...”

President Sarmiento thought that the lack of funding could be easily resolved by asking Japan or Gameraica for support.

“Our country neighbors Venisuela. We are the most vulnerable to Joker’s threats. We are not looking to expand our army. We just wish to train adventurers that could take on Joker’s monsters if he attacks. We should discuss this matter with Brezil, as they are faced with the same issue. Together, we can negotiate with Gameraica, the EU, and Japan.”

“I’m not sure how the EU and Gameraica will react, but Japan is likely to lend their support. Their dungeon policies are the most advanced in the world, and they’ve been actively helping other countries. If we first bring up that we need help with the refugee crisis, Japan will be even more tempted to use this kind of

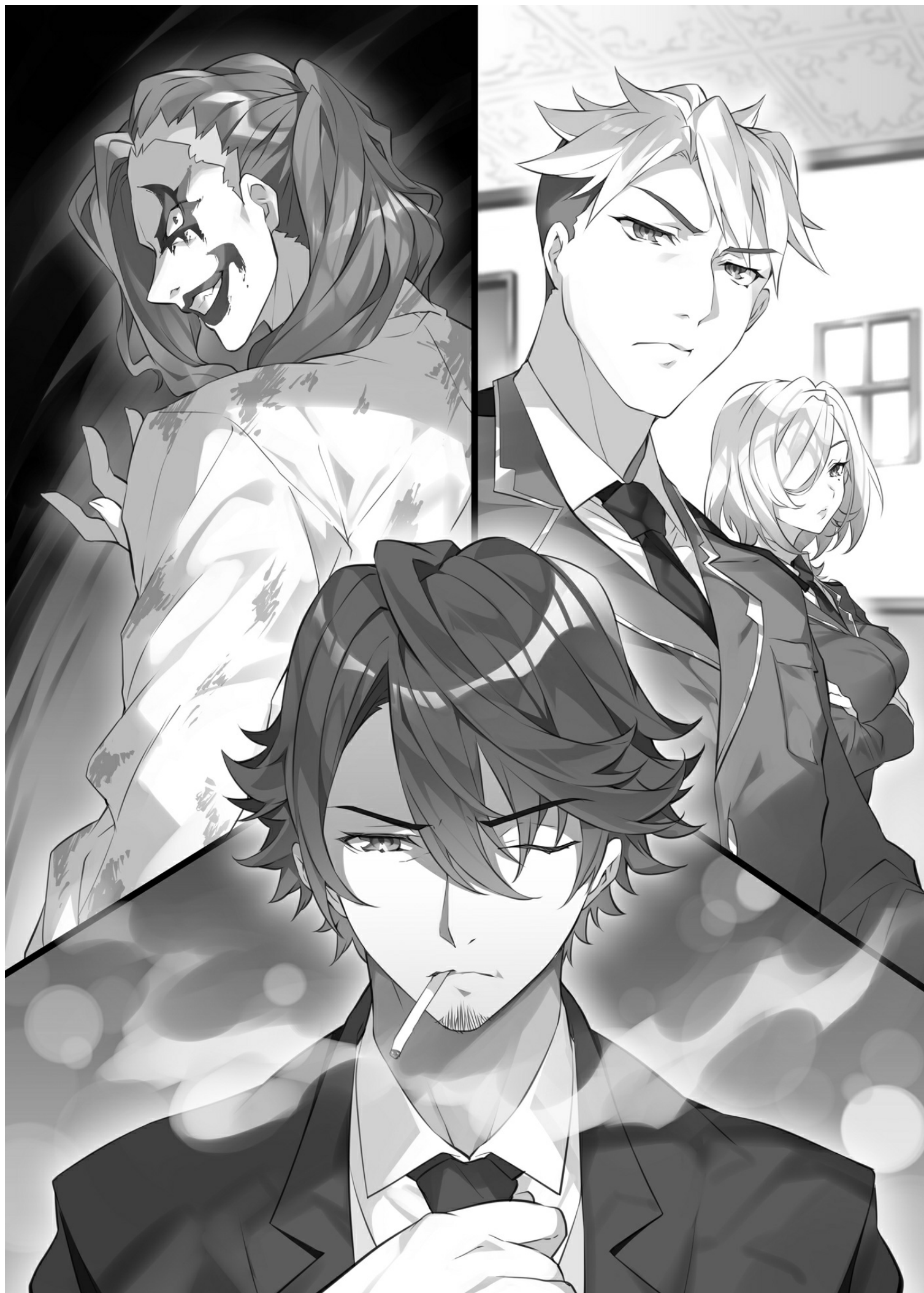
support as an excuse to avoid the criticism they'd receive by refusing to take in refugees."

"Gamerica's presidential elections are just around the corner, so it's quite impossible to predict President Howard's reaction. As for the EU, negotiations should be possible. Africa isn't that far south of Europe. They should be feeling some pressure from Joker's threats. Many are also Catholics."

"All right. First, contact Brezil to lay the groundwork, and try to gauge the situation by talking to the Japanese ambassador. Depending on how that goes, we'll move on to the EU and the Vatican next."

The ministers moved to follow the president's orders. As he wished, Colombian started cooperating with Brezil, the largest country in South Gamerica, and both countries asked for support in order to ensure their protection.

In May of 2020, the world would fall deeper and deeper into turmoil, and topics such as the Tokyo Olympics were almost totally forgotten. Between the Busters, the Crusaders, and the Legion led by Joker... What was to become of the world? At that time, no one could predict it.



Afterword

I would like to express my deepest thanks for picking up *Dungeon Busters*.

The most important event in this third volume is the training of the Dungeon Crusaders. The organization formed by the Vatican State traveled to Japan and underwent training alongside Dungeon Busters.

On the other side of the world, Joker, the Demon King, appeared in South Gamera and has started interfering with the main character's goal of preventing the Monster Stampede.

In low fantasy works, humans are usually more of a threat than monsters. Opposing the people who wish to save the world are those who have lost hope in the current world and wish to change it. I am not trying to decide who is right but rather show their different beliefs and senses of justice. Since I am writing low fantasy, I wanted to write a world in which there was no such thing as absolute evil.

I hope you will look forward to the way the Busters, the Crusaders, and Joker's Legion will interact with the rest of the world.

I would also like to say once again that, as written on the obi, my work will be adapted into a manga. I would be the happiest man on Earth if you could enjoy the world of *Dungeon Busters* in this new medium as well.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to I-shi, my assigned editor at Overlap, who has supported me without fail since volume 1. Thank you so much.

Written from a café in Shishibone 1-*chome*,

Toma Shinozaki

The cover art features a female character, Akane, in a dynamic pose. She has long, dark hair with a red headband and is wearing a red and black outfit with a large, textured black chest plate. She is looking upwards with a determined expression, her right hand raised to her forehead. The background is a warm, golden-yellow with a grid-like pattern.

DUNGEON BUSTERS

Vol. 3

Author

Toma Shinozaki

Illustrator

SenriGAN

message

Akane is thoroughly exhausted.



"Hello.
Greetings to
the various
heads of
state and to
every single
one of my
beloved
humans."



name **Joker**

Buster/Demon King

Bonus Short Stories

Ezoe Kazuhiko's Stroll Through Edogawa City 3 —Restaurant Unagi "Tomokazu" (Koiwa Station)

How would you describe restaurants that serve big portions? Usually, one would picture full plates but food with only a rather average taste. Most restaurants of this kind tend to fall into the realm of cheap and tasty places that most people enjoy but that don't impress anyone. If one were to look up such places online, they would immediately notice that most served napolitan spaghetti, katsu curry, omurice, karaage meal sets, or other such dishes that were cheap to make and full of carbs and lipids to make the customers feel full.

The prices generally never went over a thousand yen, and it was rather common to visit these establishments for lunch. As for luxurious restaurants serving large portions... That was pretty much unheard of. I mean, try to picture it for a second—a full kilo of truffle cream spaghetti, for which the cook would have to use up a full truffle, or a whole litter of shark fin soup... Even if these dishes were to be served, they'd end up costing over ten thousand yen. Would such things sell? Only people willing to take on a "how much can you eat" challenge would ever want to pay several thousand yen for large portions.

Or at least, that's how I used to think before finding this place...

Movers were currently moving furniture and boxes to our new headquarters. I had decided to leave everything to them, but Akira, Mutsuo, General Manager Mukai, and I were still present. Dungeon Busters was already quite famous, so we were keeping an eye on things to make sure no foreign spy tried to use this chance to slip inside.

Mutsuo, who had prepared equipment to detect bugs and surveillance devices used by most professionals in that line of work, was checking every nook and cranny down to the last plug. I didn't think he was overdoing it. From what he had told me, plenty of hackers and crackers had tried to compromise

our website. There was no such thing as too much when it came to ensuring our security.

“It’s almost time for lunch. My wife packed a bento for me, so the three of you can go ahead and have lunch outside,” General Manager Mukai said, as he took out a bento box from his bag.

I wasn’t particularly jealous. I was about to go eat something tasty anyway. I was not one bit jealous of General Manager Mukai’s bento made exclusively for him by his loving wife.

“Right. I guess it’s time for us three lonely guys who don’t have a nice wife making us food to find a place for lunch. What do you want to have?” Akira asked.

“Eel,” I said after a pause, ignoring Akira’s little jabs. “Tons of eel. I wanna stuff myself with eel.”

Freshly steamed eel served over rice was a dish you could never have in a bento. That’s why I picked it. Not because I was jealous, obviously.

“But, Ezoe-shi, how many portions are we going to order to get a full belly? Don’t forget that Shishido-shi is here. Lunch break will be long over by the time we finish eating.”

“Ha ha. Don’t worry. There’s a place here in Edogawa City that specializes in eel and serves large portions.”

That’s how the three of us found ourselves behind the city hall, making our way towards Tomokazu, one of the most renowned eel restaurants in Edogawa City.

“Aniki... Are you sure all that’s for one person?” Akira asked.

“It is. Well, I added an extra hundred yen to order the extra large portion. It’s 4400 yen in total.”

“Hang on, this is not normal!” Mutsuo declared. “There are at least two whole eels in this, right? This looks like five hundred grams of rice too! There’s no way this is supposed to be eaten by one person!”

Both Akira and Mutsuo looked at the lacquered boxes full of eel over rice we

had been served in disbelief.

Unagi Tomokazu was one of the extremely rare restaurants that served large servings of eel over rice. The most expensive box cost 4300 yen and came with a whole eel on top of rice. You'd get another eel and plenty of rice by throwing in an extra hundred yen, more than enough food to eat until your stomach was ready to explode.

"So good!"

Akira and Mutsuo were eating to their heart's content. We could rest assured, as the eels used by this restaurant were all caught in Japanese waters. The refreshing, sweet sauce they used also went extremely well with the eel and rice. You could even get extra sauce for free if you wanted some more. The box also came with pickled vegetables and broth. Getting all this for as little as 4300 yen (plus one hundred yen) was truly incredible.

Of course, Tokyo was full of famed eel restaurants, and for five to six thousand yen, you could get a meal at one of them. However, adventurers used up tremendous amounts of energy, much more than your average person. Only places that served large portions at a reasonable price could fulfill our need to have good food in large quantities.

Rather than picking up small amounts with my chopsticks and eating elegantly, I wanted to stuff myself with a wooden spoon. I supposed this desire was a good representation of the appetite of people who devoured portions this big.

"Hey, Aniki. Are there other restaurants like this one in Edogawa City?"

"Yeah. For instance, there's a bento place that serves a dish with a whole grilled mackerel. If you order the extra large portion, they'll even bring you two separate bowls of rice."

"Interesting!" Akira laughed.

It seemed like I had awakened the big eater in him. *I should take him to have ramen next time. There's this place that has three-kilo ramen on the menu. It should be a piece of cake for us to finish, though.*

I drove back to Shishibone while thinking of the next restaurant with large

servings we'd eat at.

The Crusaders' Day Off

My name is Rolf Schnabel. Due to certain circumstances, I'm currently in Tokyo, Japan. After spending two weeks inside Yokohama Dungeon, I went to Hibiya, wanting to get rid of the frustration I'd constantly felt ever since setting foot in Japan.

"A Köstritzer, Speckkartoffeln, and Münchner Weißwurst."

The waiter came back with a Reich black beer.

That was it. My biggest issue with Japan was the beer. The beer they usually sold in Tokyo had no taste. It was virtually like drinking carbonated water. The Japanese were good at many things, but when it came to beer, they were miles behind us Reichmen.

I gulped down my black beer, a beverage that had been appreciated by the greatest—Goethe, for instance. The rich flavor filled my mouth as I finally felt satisfied. The Japanese thought of beer as an alcoholic drink amongst others. For us Reichmen, beer was a dish of its own. You could count it as a meal rather than a beverage.

Still, I ordered other things as well. One was a dish that the people here tastelessly called Reich potatoes and the other was another dish that had been crudely nicknamed "white sausages" by the Japanese. The Hibiya restaurant I was in was renowned for its Reich cuisine, and while the taste was great, the names they used were terrible. Well, if the actual names were used, most customers would have no idea what dishes they referred to. Not much to be done about that. Either way, I enjoyed my first taste of Reich cuisine in a while.

* * *

I put on my dogi and tied my belt. I always loved this moment.

"Alberta-san, you finally have a day off, and yet you chose to come and spend it here..."

I was currently at the Kusakabe-style School of Ancient Martial Arts. They had taken good care of me while I was an exchange student and had taught me Japanese Ancient Martial Arts. What I learned here was not kendo but kenjutsu, a military art style that mixed jujutsu and atemi to take down your enemy.

I bowed once towards my instructor, Herr Kusakabe, before readying my padded wooden sword. Even when padded with leather-like so, a wooden sword would still leave bruises. In the past, padding was not added, and martial artists trained with bare wooden swords. It wasn't unusual for them to end up losing their life during practice because a hit landed in a bad spot. However, fighting with their lives on the line was what helped them hone their senses. I heard that my instructor still followed this custom and practiced with a bare wooden sword with his predecessor and his younger sister.

A shiver ran through my body. Right as I raised my wooden sword, my neck was almost hit. I retreated half a step and narrowly escaped the blow. My instructor smiled sweetly.

"I'm glad to see you have been practicing diligently. Good, good. Let's keep going then, shall we?"

His sword had come close to connecting, but I managed to calm myself down again. As a member of the Crusaders, I would have to fight countless monsters while putting my life at stake. If I couldn't face a single person, how could I ever face monsters?

I assumed my fighting stance again.

* * *

"Hi hi! Call me Chloe-tan, all right? ☆"

I was in Akihabara, the holy land of anime fans all over the world! It had always been my dream to come here. *Aaaah... I couldn't be happier!!!*

I went to all the shops the coolest cosplayers often visited and tried on a lot of things.

For some reason, a bunch of guys with cameras were now hanging around me. Ah! Could they be the infamous beings I'd heard so much about...? The legendary "disgusting otaku NEET fatties"?! Knapsacks, glasses, hair sticking all

over their foreheads... *GASP! They must want to lick and rub Chloe-tan's leggings all over...* Right?

“We ask clientele to please not take pictures inside the shop...”

What?! Don't tell ME that. You should say that to these weirdos instead!

* * *

I was currently at the Tokyo Catholic Seminary in Nerima City. The cardinal had asked me to give a lecture here.

“I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. My name is Léonard Chartres. Five hundred years ago, Saint Francis Xavier visited Japan, and since then, a bond has been sustained between this faraway land and the Catholic Church. We haven't seen eye to eye at certain times throughout history, but I thank you for welcoming the Vatican, the Crusaders, and our Catholic Church once again.”

My lecture focused on the history of the Crusades and the duties of Dungeon Crusaders. I finished with a request.

“As you know, humanity is now facing an unprecedented danger with the apparition of dungeons. I am sure that many among you are shocked and worried because of the situation. But remember, the Lord doesn't extend a helping hand to those who don't try to move forward on their own first. If you are feeling anxious, please seek help from others. Praying together and opening up your hearts to one another will surely help you find salvation.”

* * *

I decided to make my way to Tokyo's shopping district, Shibuya.

I was currently living my best life here. Japanese women were all so refined... And there were so many beauties! *Don't get me wrong.* There were a lot of pretty girls in Rome, too, but they tended to assert themselves a tad too much. When I tried to pick up girls in Rome, most usually brushed me off casually, but here, I'd already succeeded twice!

For real, Japan's the best place in the world!

“Hot guy alert! Look! Isn't he super good-looking?”

“Yeaah, but... He's a foreigner. He probably can't speak no Japanese.”

To be fair, I heard quite a lot of words I wasn't used to here. When I studied Japanese inside Yokohama Dungeon, I learned that "alert" meant that there was something dangerous ahead. Did these girls think I was a danger? And what did "can't speak no Japanese" even mean? Why would you use two negations in a row?! Yeah, no. Japanese is too complicated for me.

* * *

I was currently on the phone with my mom. I had called her using an internet voice call, so it didn't cost anything, but the time difference between Rome and Japan was quite huge. My call might have been a bother to her...

"Mom. It may be possible to fix my leg. If I use one of the potions that can be found inside the dungeons, I may be able to run again. If that comes to pass, then..."

"Franca, it's impossible. You're a member of the Crusaders now. Your body doesn't belong only to you anymore. You have a duty to fight for the Lord. You understand that, right?"

"No, I don't! I don't believe in God as much as you do, mom!"

I actually got what she meant. Me joining the Crusaders had already had a positive influence on my dad's work, and our household's finances were doing better. But I wanted to run! I wanted to go back to the track field. Was that really so wrong...?

After cutting the call, I moped in bed until I heard a knock at the door. I went to answer the door and came face-to-face with the other members of the Crusaders. In their hands were several souvenirs they had gotten me as well as a flask filled with a blue liquid.

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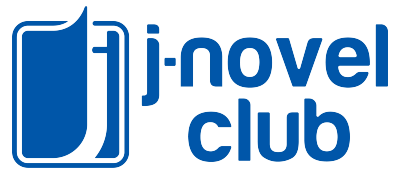
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Dungeon Busters: Volume 3

by Toma Shinozaki

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